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Table of Contents

Table of Contents
Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 1: Not Homesick for Home
Chapter 2: Old Friends
Chapter 3: A Village Suspended in Time
Chapter 4: The Black Scythe Reaps
Chapter 5: The Weight of a Fist
Chapter 6: A Girl and Her Wrath
Chapter 7: A Well-Governed City
Chapter 8: The Desert of Extinction
Chapter 9: Wielding Extra Impact
Chapter 10: The Fearsome Beast of the Sandstorm
Chapter 11: Crimson Thunder
Chapter 12: Corpse, the Adventurer
Chapter 13: The Fate of Rude Holy Knights
Chapter 14: Gluttony and Wrath
Chapter 15: An Old Knight in His Twilight
Chapter 16: Secrets of the Blade of Light
Chapter 17: The Battle They Were Waiting For
Chapter 18: The City of the Dead
Chapter 19: The Power of Master and Apprentice
Chapter 20: Cleansing Light
Chapter 21: New Possibilities
Chapter 22: Dignity Regained
Chapter 23: Myne's Request
Chapter 24: The Green Demi-Humans
Chapter 25: The Dance of the Black Axe
Chapter 26: The Village of Oblivion
Chapter 27: The Insurmountable Chimera
Chapter 28: Power Unleashed
Chapter 29: The Third Level
Chapter 30: In the Lands of Galia
Side Story: Roxy's Expedition
Creator Profiles
Newsletter

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 1: Not Homesick for Home
Chapter 2: Old Friends
Chapter 3: A Village Suspended in Time
Chapter 4: The Black Scythe Reaps
Chapter 5: The Weight of a Fist
Chapter 6: A Girl and Her Wrath
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Chapter 18: The City of the Dead
Chapter 19: The Power of Master and Apprentice
Chapter 20: Cleansing Light
Chapter 21: New Possibilities
Chapter 22: Dignity Regained
Chapter 23: Myne's Request
Chapter 24: The Green Demi-Humans
Chapter 25: The Dance of the Black Axe
Chapter 26: The Village of Oblivion
Chapter 27: The Insurmountable Chimera
Chapter 28: Power Unleashed
Chapter 29: The Third Level
Chapter 30: In the Lands of Galia
Side Story: Roxy's Expedition
Creator Profiles
Newsletter

The axe's sheer force caused a shockwave that forced the lava back toward Haniel's knees.

"It's our turn now," Myne said. "Fate, make sure Haniel can't move."

"I'll try not to get in your way."

"That's the spirit."

With her black axe in one hand, Myne leapt toward Haniel, and in that same dance-like motion lopped off the beast's right arm. Haniel bellowed in pain, and the girl at the chimera's core wept scarlet tears of blood.

"Let me help."

For the first time in my life, I began to charge the tech-art Grand Cross. I poured in my magic and my resolve, and watched as the holy blade began to glow white.

"Fate, you have..."

"I know. Now. Let's end this."

"Yes," Aaron said. "Once and for all."

We poured all of our power into our shining blades. Our voices called out as one.

"Grand Cross!"

The castle was radiant with our combined light. In that instant, everything we could see was overtaken in burning, holy white.

BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL

II

WRITTEN BY
ISSHIKI ICHIKA

ILLUSTRATED BY
FAME

Seven Seas Entertainment

BOSHOKU NO BERUSERUKU
-OREDAKE LEVEL TO IU GAINEN WO TOPPA SURU - VOL. 2

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Illustrations by fame

This edition originally published in Japan in 2018 by
MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.
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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-086-4
Printed in Canada
First Printing: April 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	Not Homesick for Home
CHAPTER 2	Old Friends
CHAPTER 3	A Village Suspended in Time
CHAPTER 4	The Black Scythe Reaps
CHAPTER 5	The Weight of a Fist
CHAPTER 6	A Girl and Her Wrath
CHAPTER 7	A Well-Governed City
CHAPTER 8	The Desert of Extinction
CHAPTER 9	Wielding Extra Impact
CHAPTER 10	The Fearsome Beast of the Sandstorm
CHAPTER 11	Crimson Thunder
CHAPTER 12	Corpse, the Adventurer
CHAPTER 13	The Fate of Rude Holy Knights
CHAPTER 14	Gluttony and Wrath
CHAPTER 15	An Old Knight in His Twilight
CHAPTER 16	Secrets of the Blade of Light
CHAPTER 17	The Battle They Were Waiting For
CHAPTER 18	The City of the Dead
CHAPTER 19	The Power of Master and Apprentice
CHAPTER 20	Cleansing Light
CHAPTER 21	New Possibilities
CHAPTER 22	Dignity Regained
CHAPTER 23	Myne's Request
CHAPTER 24	The Green Demi-Humans
CHAPTER 25	The Dance of the Black Axe
CHAPTER 26	The Village of Oblivion
CHAPTER 27	The Insurmountable Chimera
CHAPTER 28	Power Unleashed
CHAPTER 29	The Third Level
CHAPTER 30	In the Lands of Galia
SIDE STORY	Roxy's Expedition

Chapter 1:
Not Homesick for Home

I PUT MY HAND on an old, well-worn door, a door I'd known since my youth. It creaked as I pushed it open. Inside our house sat my father, resting on a chair. By his side, against the wall, lay his trusty spear, worn with use. The spear's blade was sticky with blackened blood. My father's face was pallid and his arm bore a deep wound. One short glance was more than enough to tell me that he had battled monsters on his way home. I ran to his side, worried.

"Dad! Are you all right?!" I cried.

My father replied with a chuckle. "This little scratch? It's nothing serious." He always tried to play down the severity of his wounds, but even as a child I knew better.

I hurried to draw fresh water from the well outside. The water was so cold that it numbed my hands. I hauled the heavy bucket back inside and began to clean my father's cut. His grimace when the rag touched his flesh confirmed my fears; this wound was no mere scratch.

Our village was known for a medicinal plant called "miel." Most local families kept a stock of miel, and we were no different. I fetched the leaves from a shelf in our back room and crushed them to a paste, then rubbed the paste over my father's wound before bandaging it. My father watched in silence while I worked. Only when I finished tying the bandage did he open his mouth to speak.

"You've gotten good at this, Fay," he said.

"Of course I have! You keep going out and getting yourself injured!"

"Ah…you're right. I…I'm sorry."

My father ruffled my hair with his injured arm, at a loss for words. Then a thought occurred to him, and he stood up from his chair.

"Shall we visit your mother?" he asked.

"Okay."

My mother's grave lay directly behind our house. She'd died soon after my birth, and requested that we bury her there. That way, even if she couldn't see her son with her own eyes, she could at least watch over me from nearby. This was why, whenever possible, my father and I visited her once a day.

We knelt before her grave—always swept clean and kept free of weeds—and put our hands together in prayer. From the corner of my eye, I saw my father's jaw twitch, and he grimaced. It was the pain from the wound I'd just mended. He was doing his best to endure, but I knew his arm must hurt.

"Mom won't get mad if you don't clasp your hands, Dad."

"Yeah, I know. But I want to do it, okay?"

Deep in his heart, my father was committed to our routines. He still smiled through difficult times, and he still ruffled my hair, despite his wounds. Even back then, even though I was only a child, I recognized those moments as flashes of my father's true resolve.

***

"Never happier than when you're muttering in your sleep, are you, Fate?"
The rickety cart we rode in clattered over a rock, jolting me from the gentle nostalgia of my dream. Over the crunch of wheels and dirt, the black sword Greed's laughter echoed hollowly through my Telepathy.
"What are you laughing at?!" I sat up, holding my head.
"I'm laughing at you," said the black sword. "You and your muttering. 'Dad…Dad…' You're still such a child."
Greed catching me mumbling about my parents in my sleep was horribly embarrassing. Not only would he never let me live it down, he would undoubtedly remind me of what he heard any chance he got. I sighed. I might as well have served up my weaknesses on a silver platter.
We'd been out on the road for a full two days, a lull which had given me plenty of time to think back on the better days of my youth. But now, at last, the old horse and cart I'd hired arrived in Tetra.
Tetra was, more or less, a merchant town. At only a tenth of the population of the kingdom's capital, Seifort, it was still lively and active in its own right. As a hub for goods and produce from the south, it was popular among many of the kingdom's merchants.
However, Greed and I were headed much farther south, aiming for the infamously dangerous country of Galia. The sun was already setting by the time we arrived in Tetra, but I asked around to see whether I could find another merchant willing to take us farther. None of the caravans were interested, which didn't surprise me; traveling at night invited attacks from ferocious monsters.
Fortunately, I wasn't in a hurry. I was on the lookout for any signs of Lady Roxy Hart or her soldiers, but as it turned out, none of them had reached Tetra yet, which meant I was well ahead of them. Lady Roxy was…well, she was my friend, and only a year older than me, yet as a holy knight of Seifort and the head of the noble Hart family, she was currently leading an entire army into Galia.
Her army's journey would take time. It was different for me, traveling alone. I had to be careful not to outpace them too much.
With all that in mind, I decided to stay overnight in Tetra. As long as I had extra time, it made sense to use it to get as strong as I possibly could before I reached Galia. I'd spend the evening hunting monsters on the outskirts of Tetra, and in the morning I'd find a merchant willing to ferry us farther south.

As for money for my expedition, I'd received a generous sum from the head servant of Hart manor before I left. So long as I didn't go crazy with lavish spending, these funds would be more than enough to see me to Galia. The head servant must have known I intended to follow Lady Roxy all the way. Perhaps that was why she'd tried so hard to stop me.

"I'll use your money wisely," I murmured, and I gripped the coin purse tightly, careful not to drop anything.

I wandered down the evening streets. The truth was that this wasn't my first time in Tetra. I'd come through after I fled the village where I'd grown up, briefly stopping there on my way to Seifort. Back then, I'd been driven out of my own village, alone, with barely a coin to my name. I remembered finding a quiet back alley and squeezing into a corner to sleep. In the morning, I'd used the last of my money to buy three pieces of stale bread, then departed for Seifort on foot.

Looking back on it now, it amazed me that I'd survived the journey to Seifort. But my life had only gotten harder after I arrived… Again, my head flooded with memories I no longer wanted to recall. Fortunately, my stomach interrupted with a loud rumble, crying out for sustenance. I still had provisions I'd bought in Seifort, but this was a good chance to indulge in some of the Tetran cuisine I'd missed out on last time.

A big wooden sign to my right pointed out an old tavern. It'd been a long day, and I wanted a drink alongside my meal; a tavern sounded perfect. I opened the aged, weathered door and stepped inside.

This tavern was far more spacious than my old haunt back in Seifort. It featured about thirty seats and was liberally decorated without feeling too cramped or overwrought. I took a seat at the counter, in the corner. No matter what bar I visited, the corner was always where I felt most at home.

The barkeep behind the counter called out to me as he polished cups. "What can I get you?"

"What do you recommend?" I asked.

"If you're after a drink, you can't go wrong with red wine from the Hart family estate. For a meal, it's gotta be the rabbit soup with buttered bread. All in all, that's twenty copper coins. What do you say?"

"Bit steep, if you ask me. Jacking up the price just because I'm not from around here, huh? Fifteen, and I'll take it."

The barkeep laughed and shouted my order back to the kitchen staff. I pushed my fifteen copper across the counter and glanced around the bar while I waited. About half the diners were merchants. The other half were adventurers. All of them were dressed well. It seemed the clientele here ran quite wealthy, which explained the high prices.

I licked my lips excitedly at the arrival of my meal, then chowed down. While I ate, I made plans for the upcoming morning. My best course of action would be hitching a ride to the next big town with another wagon. Hopping caravans would ensure I always wound up in a place where I could find lodgings and locations to stock up on provisions as I traveled. I couldn't

afford to arrive in Galia an exhausted wreck, but the single skill I'd been born with, Gluttony, rendered me eternally hungry. Food and eating forever lurked at the back of my mind.

I gobbled down my soup and bread, sparing nothing, not even the last crumb. Just as I set my cup of wine to my lips, a commotion broke out on the other side of the bar. I turned to see what was going on.

The ruckus came from a table of six adventurers. Arrogance hardened their faces. In front of their table a man kneeled, head to the floor, bowing profusely as they ate. The man continued to bow, over and over, as the adventurers hurled abuse at him. The whole spectacle was disgusting enough to sour the taste of wine in my mouth.

I didn't usually get involved in messes like this. But this was a special case. I'd seen the man scraping in front of them before. I *knew* him. What was he doing here, begging at the feet of these callous adventurers?

I listened as their conversation continued, all of them oblivious to my gaze.

"You *do* know that monsters are everywhere because of what's happening in Galia, right? And you *must* know that requests for monster hunters have shot through the roof, right? You know all of this, and yet you're still here asking us to go all the way to some backwater mountain village to slay beasts for a few measly silver?"

"I'm begging you," the man said. "Please. If we don't hurry, my entire village is doomed."

"Shut up. Enough already. Go find someone else. Can't you see we're eating here?"

"Please. Please, I'm begging you. Everybody else has turned me down, and I'm running out of time. Please, you must save my village!"

A bearded adventurer stood and placed his boot on the man's head.

"If you're going to bow," he said, "then you have to really drive your head into the ground. Like this, see? Show us how sincere you are. You get me?"

"Please…please help us…" the man mumbled, his words distorted against the wood. He lay trapped under the forceful push of the adventurer's boot. His tears pooled on the floor as he pleaded.

The adventurers watched and laughed. Finally, the bearded adventurer slowly took his foot from the man's head, tired of the joke. "All right, we'll do it."

"Really?!"

"But you have to understand. We've got a lot of requests to get through, right? Boatloads of them. So, I'm sure we can get to yours…yeah, about a year from now. Oh, and because you're making us walk through the mountains? That's an additional ten gold coins on top of our usual fee."

"But that's… We can't wait that long. A-and I told you, I only have ten silver."

The kneeling man's answer left the adventurers bellowing with laughter, as if bullying were a snack to enjoy alongside their drinks.

"In that case, no deal," said the adventurer. "Better find someone else."

“Have you no compassion?! Please, I beg of you! Help us!”
“No. Compassion doesn’t fill my wallet.”
Despite the adventurers’ obvious disdain, the kneeling man refused to give up. He slammed his head into the ground. He begged. And he begged, and begged. Maybe they had taken him for a joke before, but now I could see his persistence was starting to really annoy them.
“Shut up, already! Learn your place, weakling!” one shouted.
The bearded adventurer lifted the pleading man by his shirt. “Listen! We don’t care what happens to your backwater village!”
With that, the bearded adventurer’s fist flew through the air. He wasn’t holding back. I knew that if that punch landed, it would cripple the man. However, the punch didn’t land. Before I realized I was moving, I stopped the blow in place with a single hand.
“That’s enough,” I said.
The adventurer turned his anger on me. “Don’t stick your nose in other people’s business! And don’t think, when you do, you’ll get away without—”
I squeezed his fist. His eyes widened with shock at the power of my grip, and he collapsed to his knees.
“Okay! I’ll stop! I’ll stop! Please, just…just let me go…”
“How kind of you,” I said. “Now, go back and eat with your friends. Quietly. You’re bothering the other diners.”
“I will. I will! Just, please…let me go. My hand…it’s going to break…!”
The difference in our strength was clear, and the adventurer knew it. He slunk back to his place at the table, where the group of adventurers now sat in silence. Their table had the air of a funeral.
The man I’d just saved stared at me. As he saw my face, his eyes went wide. He stepped backward and placed a hand on his mouth. He couldn’t hide his surprise. Couldn’t hide his shock.
He and I had grown up together in the village I once called home. We’d never been friends.
“It’s been a while, Set,” I said. “How long exactly? Five years?”

Chapter 2:
Old Friends

SET FLINCHED AWKWARDLY at my casual greeting. Then he made up his mind and dropped to his knees, bowing before me. I didn't have a chance to stop him.

"Fate! Please! We need your help! I won't ask you to forget the past, and I know it's not something we can just wash away. But please, just this once…"

Set was four years older than me, and the son of the village elder. Back in our youth, he had been the ringleader of the village children. The other kids followed his lead, doing whatever he said. He pelted me with rocks, and on the day I left five years ago, rocks had fallen like rain as he howled at me to leave. Then the village elder and the other adults had burned my house, keeping the fire going until it was nothing but ashes. I remembered that day. A downpour of rocks, an inescapable rain of despair. The destruction of my home. Complete and utter banishment.

And now the same Set, the man who had done all of that, knelt before me, begging. Pleading for me to help him because I finally seemed useful.

I had been driven out of my village. They had deemed me worthless because of my Gluttony, nothing but a freeloader. But over the next five years Gluttony's true powers had taken root, and *now* they needed me. But Set wasn't looking at *me*. He wasn't looking at Fate, the man. I could have been anyone, so long as I had power.

The Set who knelt before me with his head pressed into the floor…this was a far cry from the Set I'd known five years ago. Gone was his lively youth. In its place was a pitiful portrait of desperation. And his position let me see clearly that his search for an adventurer had taken its toll; even at his young age, he was balding.

"Fate…please. Please, help us. I'll do anything you ask. Anything!"

The truth of the matter was that I never would have interfered with the pathetic scene in the first place if I had only intended to reject his pleas. I had wanted to return to the village to visit the graves of my parents, and if I happened to feed a few souls to Gluttony while I was there, it would only be because I needed the power. That was it, my own selfish reason. I was not in any way going back to aid Set or the people who had turned me out into the cold.

"Fine. I'll accompany you to the village."

"Really?! Thank you, thank you! We'll head back at first light tomorrow!"

Wait until morning? Just how worried are you about your village, anyway? I shook my head at Set. This was how he acted when people were in danger?

"No. We leave now."

“But…the sun’s already setting. It’s too dangerous to travel at night! The cloud cover makes it pitch-black out there. Walking the mountain paths with torches in hand would be like painting glowing targets on our backs for roaming monsters!”
“Sounds perfect,” I said. “I much prefer them coming to me over having to go looking for them.”
Set’s face went pale, and he shivered. Had I said something strange? Wasn’t that the most efficient way to hunt? I rested my hand on my sword hilt, and Greed spoke through my Telepathy.
“You might have killed your fair share of goblins,” he said, “but don’t let that experience get your thoughts twisted. Remember your fight with the kobolds?”
“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “I get it.”
It was true that my battle experience outside of goblins was…limited. The kobold fight, not long before I’d left Seifort, had been a true test of my abilities. My current approach to battle was likely skewed by the hundreds of goblins I’d slain. I’d killed so many since unlocking Greed’s Second Level —the skill-negating black scythe—that the goblin population around Seifort had plummeted to an all-time low.
In other words, at this point I could practically hunt goblins in my sleep. Being called “Fate the Goblin Slayer” would have been right on point. Still, Greed was right. Using the weakest known species of monster as my standard for planning hunts would only get me into trouble.
Set eyed me nervously while I muttered to Greed. I was getting used to the odd looks I received when I talked to my sword.
“Uh…are we really leaving now?” Set asked.
“Yeah, but we won’t need torches. I can see fine in the dark. Just stay close behind me.”
“Okay. I’ll follow your lead, Fate. There’s no other adventurer I can rely on.”
An adventurer…
I guessed that, to Set, that was exactly what I looked like. Maybe I’d finally graduated from “servant.” After the way I’d handled those foulmouthed adventurers earlier, perhaps it was only natural for Set to think of me that way.

***

Set and I left Tetra as the sun set. We headed deep into the western mountains, toward the village I’d once called home. It was a quiet night, if cloudy. Not bad for a walk.
Before I was driven out, the village had been called home by around sixty people, not including me. Every family’s source of income was the medicinal herb miel, a plant which could only be cultivated in the clearest of streams. Since miel was so fragile and prone to disease, our harvests were inconsistent from year to year. During the bad seasons, my father had to

bow before the village elder and ask him to share some of the village's food with us.
The main reason the village elder agreed to share with us was my father's Spear Technique skill. The village rarely encountered monsters, but on the rare occasion that one wandered nearby, it was my father's job to drive it away. He was so valuable that the other villagers were willing to overlook his worthless son with the endless appetite.
But that uneasy compromise never could have lasted. After my father died, all that remained was me: useless trash. I tried my best to harvest miel and contribute to the village, but my attempts never went well. I had no real talent for harvesting, and my father's protection was gone. In our village, those who couldn't help themselves could only hope for banishment.
I'd also been despised because of my skill. Nobody had ever seen or heard of a skill called Gluttony. Nobody knew what it did, other than make me a burden. Rumors spread like poison. Soon after my father's passing, villagers claimed that I'd bring misfortune to the entire village if I were allowed to stay. Ours was a relationship beyond repair. No, worse. I may as well have been a human piece of shit.
These memories filled my mind as I trudged up the overgrown mountain paths.
"Hey, Fate," Set called out from behind me. "At the tavern before, when you stepped in… You're really strong now. But you were such a weakling before."
"Oh yeah? I don't feel very strong. I think I'm probably about average."
"That…that didn't look average…" Set stammered.
There was an echo of suspicion in his voice, but I wasn't about to tell him that the source of my strength was my reviled Gluttony.
"What does it matter, anyway?" I asked. "Hurry up."
"Right. But can I ask one thing? I know it's a weird question to ask now, but…I feel like I have to."
"What is it?"
"Fate, do you… Do you still hate us? Do you resent the village?"
Set was probably worried that I was only accompanying him to the village to enact some kind of unhinged revenge.
What a time to ask, I thought. Then again, perhaps he'd been so desperate to find someone that he hadn't had time to think about anything else. He must have really struggled in his search.
We marched onward in silence for a while, and then I let out a sigh. "If I said I didn't resent you, I'd be lying. But my parents are still there. Your village is their resting place, so…in that way, it's important to me."
I hate you. I hate all of you, I thought. But I will save you, for my parents. That's what I'm saying.
Perhaps if I were some virtuous, saintly man, I'd sing odes to the importance of forgiveness. But it didn't matter how much forgiving I did. Forgiveness didn't mean a thing if the people I forgave never changed—if

they still considered me a maggot to be ground under their heel for all eternity. The Vlerick family had already forced me to swallow that bitter pill.

I had to admit, that was the one thing I wanted to know: had the villagers of my hometown changed in the last five years? Seeing Set beg so desperately for the village, without a thought for his own dignity, left me with a glimmer of hope. Perhaps the villagers had changed for the better. Even though they'd treated me like something far less than human, some small part of me couldn't just give up on the place.

I'd lived there with my father. The time we'd shared was precious. I wanted to change some of those old memories. I wanted to make them better.

Set and I walked through the pitch-dark night, crossing four more mountain ridges before, finally, a small village nestled among the peaks came into view. Slivers of lamplight flickered from the crouched houses, all the brighter under a sky where the moon was blotted out by clouds. Peaceful. It seemed the monsters had not yet attacked.

"We're finally here," I said. "Take me to your father. The village elder."

"Of course, Fate. I brought you all the way here, didn't I? I won't let anyone bad-mouth you. You just watch. It'll go great! So, please… Please save us from the monsters." Set bowed profusely. It was a reminder that this wasn't the man I'd once known.

I prayed this wasn't the village I'd once known either.

Chapter 3:
A Village Suspended in Time

IN THE END... Well, at least I was used to having my hopes dashed.

Set promised to be a bridge between the villagers and me, but the village elder outright rejected me. Not long after our awkward reunion, I found myself surrounded by the inhabitants of the whole village. Murder burned in their eyes. They looked at me the way other people looked at monsters. Set positioned himself between me and the mob, pleading for us to make peace.

“Everyone, please listen! Fate is here to fight the monsters for us! He’s not here for anything else!”

The villagers hesitated at Set’s words, but they kept their hoes and axes gripped tight, and their eyes remained threatening. Deep in the crowd, I heard muttering that I was back for my revenge, now that the village was at its lowest. Others suspected that I was only here to steal the reward money.

“For starters,” someone cried from the back of the crowd, “isn’t this useless deadbeat’s skill just hunger? How is *hunger* going to slay monsters? He’s nothing but a bald-faced liar!”

On and on the villagers went, hurling insult after insult. Our meeting had started because a poor village was terrified of monsters, but quickly ended because their hearts were sullied by another feeling entirely. It seemed their attitudes had only worsened since I fled.

The villagers had somehow convinced themselves that Set could hire a seasoned adventurer with their measly ten silver. Instead of returning with their savior, however, Set had fetched them the very piece of trash they’d kicked out five short years ago.

In truth, no adventurer-for-hire would travel to a mountain village this remote for less than ten gold, a princely sum equal to one thousand silver coins, but these villagers were too hysterical to listen to reason. They were furious, and not just at me, but at Set for his late return.

“You took all that time, and *this* is all you have to show for it?! All we asked was that you hire an adventurer. Can’t you even do that right?!”

“Do you really have what it takes to be the next village elder, Set?”

“We don’t even know when the monsters will return! You march right on back to Tetra this instant, and bring us a real adventurer! Do you have any idea what terror we have to live with?! It’s like you don’t have a single thought in your empty head!”

They lowered their weapons, but to the last man, every villager in the mob groaned, whined, and complained. The village elder waved them silent, then gave a long apology to all of them. He wasn’t on his own son’s side either.

“I’m so terribly, terribly sorry, my people. I was careless. Foolish. Perhaps it was still too early to send my son out on a task of such great importance. Pathetic, really. I’m disappointed myself. But fear not. Tomorrow morning, I

will head straight to Tetra myself, and I will seek out their most powerful adventurer."
Someone piped up from the back of the grumbling crowd. "But what if the monsters strike again while you're gone, Elder? We heard their horrible shrieking from the forest yesterday. We may be attacked before your return!"
"Hm… I see, I see. Yes, you raise a valid point. The very worst could occur… Well, at least Set *did* retrieve a man fit to serve as bait," the village elder said, and he pointed at me. "Perhaps he's not as useless as we thought! Yes, we'll buy ourselves time by throwing *him* to the monsters."
Wait a second, I thought. You want to use me as bait? For monsters?
All I had wanted to do was kill some monsters and visit my parents' graves. I could had never anticipated this fiasco. I was beyond disbelief—I was exasperated.
Greed, however, roared with laughter. *"You hear that, Fate? To these guys, you're just monster bait."* The black sword burst into another round of raucous laughter, which he followed with a chant: *"Fate, monster bait! Fate, monster bait! Fate, monster bait!"*
"Shut up!" I snarled as I grasped the black sword's hilt. I didn't care how I looked. I needed to intimidate the villagers. Send them a message. Shut them all up—even for a second.
"Wait," said Set, bowing. "Please, just bear this for a little longer, Fate. I beg of you."
I was beyond sick of this whole show—the insults and pleading and crowd-pleasing and mocking laughter, all of it rang in my head, leaving me with a splitting headache. These people wouldn't even let me hunt monsters in peace. Why had I ever thought they could change?
"So, we're agreed, yes?" asked the village elder. "Set, you're on guard duty. Make sure that deadweight doesn't try to escape. If monsters attack while I'm away, he's our sacrifice. And don't you dare let him flee, you hear me? I won't take responsibility for whatever happens next if you do."
The village elder nodded, satisfied with his own cleverness, and trudged back to his house. The villagers looked similarly pleased with the plan and trickled into their homes one by one. To them, I was no different than the Fate I'd been the day I left. I was still the starving loser they kicked around to keep in his place, a dirty stray. I meant so little to them that they were all too happy to band together and make me their victim.
In this place, I was utterly, entirely alone. I had no relatives who would curse the villagers when I died. By coming back here, I'd been little more than a moth drawn to the flame. I had invited my own demise.
The village returned to the cold silence of the moonless night. Only Set and I still stood, alone, in total darkness.
"This isn't what we discussed, Set. It's a bit of a twist to go so quickly from monster exterminator to monster food, isn't it?" I couldn't keep the bitterness from my voice.

“I’m sorry, Fate. I’m so, so sorry.” Set buried his face in his hands. A gust of wind whipped strands of his thinning hair.
I considered visiting my parents’ graves and leaving the village to fend for itself. Regardless of how I felt, however, my Gluttony was beginning to hunger. I didn’t think it would forgive me for simply visiting the graves and leaving. I felt that familiar, creeping itch in my right eye. A tired sigh escaped my lips. No, I needed to hunt, and soon.
“For the time being, please stay with me,” said Set. “After all, I’m supposed to make sure you can’t run away. And your old house, well…”
We both knew what had happened to my childhood home; the villagers burned it to the ground when they drove me out. Perhaps the frame remained, but in the unlikely event that it did, that charred husk could no longer offer shelter.
“Fine,” I said. “Do you live by yourself?”
“I have a daughter. My wife, she…she was eaten by the monsters in the forest.”
Ah. Perhaps that explained Set’s terror in Tetra. He would bear any torment to protect his daughter. In that small way, he reminded me of my father.
“Follow me,” Set said. “My house is just a little ways from here.”
“Fine.”
Set led me to a small, ordinary house. It was half the size of his father’s home, but big enough for a family to share. Set pulled the door open.
A girl of about five years old leapt into his arms with a happy shout. “Papa! You’re home! I was on my best behavior while you were away!”
“Oh…that’s wonderful. What a good girl you’ve been.”
The cute little girl’s face creased as she noticed something off about her father. She pointed at his head. “You’re losing more hair, Papa! Was your trip okay?”
“Oh, this? It’ll grow back soon enough. I’m…I’m sure of it.”
“Mm, okay!” Having sated her interest in that subject, the girl turned the force of her curiosity on me. “Papa, who’s this?”
“Uh…” Set stammered.
According to the girl’s grandfather, I was monster chow. But how would Set explain that to his daughter? I watched him carefully. At last, I learned my caution was misplaced.
“This is Fate! He’s really strong, and he’s here to fight the monsters for us!”
“Really?!” The girl stared up at me in awe. A moment later, she burst into tears.
Perhaps the conversation had reminded her of her late mother’s gruesome death. Set took the time to calm her, and then we sat down for dinner. I watched the two of them chatter back and forth while we ate. Set’s daughter told him that she had eaten at the village elder’s house while he was away. She seemed terrified of her grandparents, confessing that it was scary sharing their table.

“I’m so sorry,” said Set. He sounded sincere. “From now on, we’ll always eat together.”
The little girl cheered. “I love you, Papa!”
I glanced sideways at Set. “You’ve changed.”
I’d finally managed to put my thoughts into words. As a boy, Set had just been one more village lowlife willing to pelt me with rocks. Yet, despite the people surrounding him, he had grown into a genuine, caring father.
My words sent an apologetic expression across Set’s features. “I was a child, Fate. My father…I mean, the elder, I just… I always believed everything he said. I thought everything he said was the absolute truth. But…I think when I had my daughter, she helped me realize I could think for myself.”
Set was starting on a path toward goodness, but it wouldn’t mean anything if the village held him back. Perhaps this village needed rebirth—to be remade from nothing. A fresh start.
Dinner was vegetable soup with the bitter foam skimmed off the top, boiled into a thin grain porridge. It was nothing special, and I couldn’t have said it was delicious, even if I wanted to be polite. However, it was also a dish my father had often cooked. The simple taste brought back a flood of memories.
“You still eat this, huh?” I asked.
“It’s been like this since you left. We’re as poor now as we were then. The village has always been in a bad way, you know? Both the food and…the people.”
The villagers’ souls had crumbled under the weight of their impoverishment. It made me glad to have left. While I sipped at my bowl of vegetable mush, Set told me everything he knew about the monsters tormenting the village.
It was strange to realize that I was only now hearing the full details of my task. I should have asked long before we left Tetra. I should have asked about the conditions in the village, too. But somewhere in my heart, I suspected that I had needed to see everything for myself rather than merely hearing it from Set. Would I even have believed him?
Past grudges, old memories, my father… Perhaps I’d been looking for an excuse to come back. Now that I could finally relax and think, my true feelings had the space to make themselves known. As an adventurer, this kind of nostalgia was pitiful. Pathetic. I was certain Greed, at my side, was already laughing at me.
Set described the monsters as winged creatures who navigated the skies with ease. Flight alone made them dangerous. I hadn’t fought anything winged before. They were about the size of goblins, but they had wicked talons, and horns that sprouted from their heads.
“How many of these creatures are there?” I asked.
“I don’t know,” Set said. “But, from what I’ve heard, there’s definitely more than one.”
I put my hand on the hilt of the black sword. “What do you think, Greed?”

“Sounds to me like gargoyles. They’re a crafty sort. In the beginning, they attack in fits and starts, scoping out their prey. They pick off the weak, observe, and wait. Then, when the time comes, they strike in an enormous swarm.”

“Pretty nasty,” I muttered. “How do we know when they’ve decided it’s time? When do they usually swarm?”

“They like the night. Gargoyles love the shroud of a pitch-black evening, when clouds smother the moon.”

“Wait a second…”

It was overcast tonight. We hadn’t once seen the moon on the walk to the village. And one villager said they’d heard something earlier the previous day. Monsters—more than one—shrieking from the nearby forest.

Are you kidding me?

To anyone in my proximity, my Telepathic conversations with Greed made me look as if I was talking to myself. Set and his daughter frowned at me in awkward confusion, as though they weren’t sure whether they should answer my mumbling. *Please don’t look at me like that,* I thought. *It’s distracting. This is important.*

My worst fears were realized before my hunch had a chance to congeal. From outside Set’s house, human voices began to scream, both in rage and pure panic. We were in trouble. Greed, however, seemed to think it was hilarious.

“Well, how about it, Fate?” he said. “Ready to assuage those nasty monsters as a sweet little human sacrifice? Fate, monster bait! Fate, monster bait! Fate, monster bait!”

I brushed aside Greed’s mockery. “Don’t be stupid. We’re going outside.”

Chapter 4:
The Black Scythe Reaps

I TOLD SET TO REMAIN INDOORS with his daughter, and not to leave his house under any circumstances if he wished to live. Then, I stalked out the door. The night was a moonless, murky black, but with my Night Vision, the gruesome scene played out before me as clearly as though it were happening at midday. I heard shrieks above and looked up. Villagers had been snatched into the sky, screaming and thrashing, as the swarming gargoyles devoured them alive. The monsters' wings blotted out the stars more thoroughly than the clouds. Human blood rained down in thick crimson drops.
It was too late to save the villagers. I drew the black sword from its scabbard and prepared to defend myself from the incoming gargoyles, quickly using Identify on one within range.

Gargoyle Noa, Lv 27
Vitality: 890
Strength: 760
Magic: 1,390
Spirit: 1,230
Agility: 980
Skills: Fireball (Spell)

So, these guys can cast fireballs. If they take to the sky and all fire at once, it's going to be bad news for me.
I quickly transformed the black sword into the form of his First Level, the black bow. I aimed it at a gargoyle chewing messily through a villager's stomach and launched my opening shot. The magic arrow flew without hesitation and pierced straight between the gargoyle's eyes.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +890, Strength +760, Magic +1,390, Spirit +1,230, Agility +980. New skill added: Fireball (Spell).

Nice! Got my first spell!
But it was no time to celebrate. The dead gargoyle plummeted from the sky, clutching the villager's chewed corpse. The two of them, twined together, landed with a thud near my feet. The corpse was the body of the village elder, the one who had so callously ordered my death. With him gone, who else could take control and lead the survivors to shelter? These villagers had made it clear that they weren't about to listen to me or Set.

The remaining gargoyles were unfazed by their fallen comrade. Drunk on the taste of human flesh, they readied themselves to attack their next meal.
“Fate, there’s a rain of magic coming,” Greed warned. “It’s time to unleash the scythe!”
I transformed Greed into his Second Level, the black scythe, and leaped onto the roof of Set’s house. At the very least, I would protect him and his daughter.
The instant after I landed, the sky erupted into scarlet flames. Thirty fireballs blazed toward the village like magic meteors. It was a terrifying combination spell with a huge area of effect, summoned by thirty gargoyle noas working in deadly concert. Such a spell would pummel a house to embers, erasing it from the earth itself.
I couldn’t stop all the fireballs, but I cut down two as they streaked toward Set’s house. The moment they touched the scythe’s blade, the flames fizzled into air. Greed had bragged that the Second Level would cut anything down to its essence, but in actuality the blade had very specific limits.
The scythe could negate any skill-created phenomena. The gargoyle noas’ fireballs were produced by a skill, so I could extinguish them with a slice of the scythe’s blade. However, phenomena that occurred as the indirect result of a skill fell outside the scythe’s scope. That meant it was powerless against the mundane fires the rain of fireballs ignited. If the scythe could’ve extinguished such things, it would truly have been unstoppable.
That minor flaw aside, the black scythe was more than proving its worth in a battle of magic.
Around me, the village blazed, the flames illuminating the surroundings in a hellish false daylight. Villagers fled their burning homes, flinging themselves to the ground and rolling to douse the flames on their hair and clothes. This only led them to throw themselves into the waiting claws of the gargoyles, who pounced and devoured them with glee.
I counted thirty gargoyle noas, and they made short work of the villagers. In moments, I estimated fewer than half of the villagers remained. But the ravenous gargoyles were far from satisfied. They flicked their glinting eyes toward Set’s little home, the only house to have escaped their inferno. We were their next target.
Fine by me. They’d be easier to handle as a single tight-packed group.
The thirty gargoyles turned to face me, standing on the roof of Set’s house. Rather than approaching, the monsters launched another rain of fire.
They’d seen me deflect two fireballs, and now banked on the notion that they’d overwhelm me with thirty. The fireballs flew toward me, a wall of searing flame.
Finally. It was time to use the strategy I’d practiced on the goblins of Seifort.
“Are you ready, Greed? I’m going to do it.”
“Can you manage it without screwing up? I admit, I’m a little worried, but… sure, go on. Give it a shot.”

I spun the black scythe with all the power I had and launched the weapon at the gargoyles. The cursed blade passed through the incoming wall of flame, extinguishing it in a single swoop. Then it collided with the hovering gargoyles, still spinning, shredding them to pieces.
Its job complete, the black scythe spun in an arc like a boomerang and returned to my hand. The “thwack” of the black metal hitting my glove felt good. *Practice pays off.*
The pieces of twenty-eight gargoyles tumbled from the sky around Set’s house.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +24,920, Strength +21,280, Magic +38,920, Spirit +34,440, Agility +27,440.

Only two gargoyles remained. With their comrades cut to pieces, they mutually decided on the same course of action: turn tail and run.
“Not so fast!” I shouted.
I transformed the black scythe into the black bow and shot the gargoyles down. The metallic voice informed me of their deaths by way of a stat update.
I turned Greed back into a scythe. I knew that packs of monsters always had a leader. There was no sign of one here, which meant…
“Fate!” Greed’s warning rang in my head. *“Above you!”*
“I’ve got it!”
Overhead, a black shadow swooped down from on high, a huge fireball growing between its talons. I used Identify to reveal the name of my new foe as it dove toward me.

Gargoyle Neo, Lv 47
Vitality: 12,890
Strength: 11,760
Magic: 23,390
Spirit: 23,230
Agility: 12,980
Skills: Fireball (Spell), Fire Resistance

Having observed its underlings in battle, the neo had decided its best bet was to kill me at close range. It was clearly a more powerful spellcaster than the noas had been, and thanks to its Fire Resistance skill, it could launch a point-blank fireball attack.
Still, in the end, it was just a monster fighting solely on instinct. Could it fully grasp the threat of the black scythe?
The gargoyle neo sped toward me at tremendous speed, preparing to engulf both me and Set’s house in the flames that swirled within its spell. I waited until the monster was just within its own point-blank range, and I struck.

Just moments before it released its spell, I swung the scythe, slicing the gargoyle into ragged halves from top to bottom. The two sides of the gargoyle's body hurtled past me, propelled by their momentum, until they hit Set's thatched roof in two wet chunks.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +12,890, Strength +11,760, Magic +23,390, Spirit +23,230, Agility +12,980. New skills added: Fire Resistance.

With that, I earned a second fire-elemental skill. I used Identify to examine it and discovered that Fire Resistance lessened damage from fire spells by half. Unfortunately, that resistance only covered fire summoned by spells and magic. It was useless against real fire.

Gluttony's bottomless hunger had been slaked, at least for now, by this banquet of gargoyle souls. The warning throbbing in my right eye subsided. Spattered with monster blood, standing on the singed rooftop…I felt fantastic.

My mood stood in stark contrast to the rest of the village, which was the image of desolation. Except for Set's house, the entire place had been razed to the ground by the storm of fireballs. The scorched earth, blackened by the gargoyles' spells, made me think of fields burnt in summer.

The village's few survivors crawled from the charred remains of their homes, covered in burns and ashes. The price of our battle had been steep. From the rooftop, I counted four survivors. Including myself, Set, and his daughter, that made seven in total… There was nothing I could do for the rest.

I took in the smoldering ashes and the still burning homes, a reflection of my own memories and conflicted emotions. The village had burned to the ground, reduced to little more than ashes. A hole had opened in my heart. Seven people… In no world was that enough to populate a village.

I sat down heavily and stared at the embers drifting over the ruins. As I watched, Set and his daughter peeked out from their door and looked up at me.

"Fate," Set said. "What in the world…?"

"It was a swarm of gargoyles," I answered. "I fought them off as best I could, but…there were too many fireballs, at too great a range. It was all I could do just to protect this house. This is the result."

I returned my gaze to the ashes I had once called my village. Set said no more. He was in shock. His daughter had forgotten how to even cry, and she clung to her father's leg as though she would never, ever let it go.

It had been a horrible, rotten village. Shit, all the way to its core. But now that it was gone, my dark feelings were little more substantial than the smoke rising from its ruin. All that remained was a loneliness I couldn't quite place. Perhaps this was what people called nostalgia… But I didn't really know.

Only one thing was clear to me: the place I had once called home was now lost to us all.

Chapter 5:
The Weight of a Fist

COME MORNING, the heavy clouds peeled away, and the blue sky returned. I picked across the smoking remains of the village in the early light of day. It had burned cleanly to the ground. The few surviving villagers wept, kneeling on the charred earth. They had lost everything, but still, they didn't move to help each other.

Set's house was the only place left unscathed, a strange and perplexing sight among the charnel. Knowing these people, I was sure it was only a matter of time before they accused him of conspiring with the gargoyles. That would fit their typical pattern of behavior. Regardless of what the others said or did, it would be up to Set to decide what he would do next.

I spoke briefly to Set before I headed out to the ruins that were once my home. It was time to finish what I'd come to do. I walked to the southernmost point of the village, followed by the scent of smoke and ash. The land that had once held my house lay at the outskirts of the village, past the scope of the gargoyles' attack. Wild grass and weeds overran the ground that house had sat on. I tried to push through, but it was a mess, a thicket of tangled greenery. I unsheathed Greed and cut down the long grass in my way. After some time, I finally made it to two small gravestones nestled together side by side.

"Father," I said. "Mother. I'm home."

Moss covered the gravestones. They hadn't seen the sun in a long time. I returned my sword to its sheath and knelt to tidy them. I started with my mother's gravestone, using my bare hands to clean off the moss. According to my father's stories, she'd been a bit of a nosy gossip-hound, but I would never know what she had really been like.

"Done!" I said. "All cleaned up. Now it's time for you, Dad."

My father had passed away of an illness when I was eleven. I'd always looked up to him, the man who fought off wandering monsters with his Spear Technique, who always did his best to help the village. He hadn't done it for his own sake, either, but to keep me safe despite my worthless skill.

He had often smiled, through good times and bad. This struck me as strange, even as a kid, and I remembered when I'd asked him why he bothered. He had replied, "If you can smile through the tough times, whatever they may be, then happiness will eventually smile back upon you." Hearing those words, I decided I'd do my best and smile too.

The day he died had been the day I stopped smiling. Five years later, standing at his grave, I finally knew why he'd made the effort. In his smile, he'd held all of his love, and all of his hope for my future happiness.

Now, I could return happiness's smile to my father, here in his place of rest.

“Father, I’m fine. I can walk my own path now, and I can do it myself.”
I finished cleaning my father’s grave, then returned to my feet.

When would I be able to visit again? This might well be the last time. If I survived whatever awaited me in Galia, I'd return and tell my parents everything—about my Gluttony, about Lady Roxy, about Greed. Until then, the tale was unfinished, so I decided it was best to leave it untold. I needed to continue my journey.

On my way back, I found Set standing under the shade of a large tree, waiting for me.

"Everything go all right?" he asked.

"Yeah. I just wanted to tend their gravestones and pay my respects."

"I see…" Set looked like he wanted to say something. We stood there in an awkward silence, then he suddenly dropped into a deep bow. "Please, let me apologize—for yesterday. And for the past. For everything. I'm so sorry."

"I know where you're coming from Set," I said. "But…"

My eyes narrowed. I took Greed in hand and transformed the black sword into the black bow. I pulled the bowstring taut, crafted a magic arrow, and nocked it against the string. Set went pale at the sight, frozen in place. *Stay right there*, I thought.

"Fate, no…you can't…" Set shook in abject terror.

It didn't matter. I loosed the arrow.

Set closed his eyes and clenched his teeth as the arrow skimmed his cheek and disappeared into the branches of the tree behind him. Moments later, we heard the gurgle of a pained beast, and a gargoyle noa dropped out of the leaves.

"What the…?! A monster?!" Set's legs gave out, and he fell right on his ass.

The gargoyle plummeted to the earth. It had been aiming to attack Set from the tree, but fortunately, I'd noticed it in time, just when he began speaking. If I'd shot the arrow a few moments later, Set would've been a dead man.

"Seems there're a couple stragglers," I said.

As the droning metallic voice in my head listed my updated stats, I reached out a hand to help Set to his feet; he was still in shock, and he didn't respond to my voice.

"Hey! Set!" I said. "You in there?" I gave him a refreshing little slap on the cheek.

As his eyes focused, he collapsed once more to the ground. "What a shock! I never imagined one of them would be up there. I really thought you were going to…"

Set didn't finish his sentence. Perhaps he couldn't. But it was clear what he'd thought: that I was going to kill him. I supposed anyone in his position might think the same thing. I had more than enough reason to do so, and Set knew he deserved it. A tense silence stretched between us.

It was, again, Set who broke the silence first. He got back to his feet and looked me in the eye. "Fate, I want you to hit me. I know it won't make up for everything that happened, but I won't be able to move on unless you do."

Hit him? Really? I wasn't sure about this.
Greed spoke up through my Telepathy, chuckling. "Go on, do it. Give him everything you've got. Put all your stats behind it."
Yeah… Something about Set's request just resonated with me. I needed to answer this tension between us—offer a punctuation mark to end all of it. I decided to give Set exactly what he wanted.
"Okay," I said. "But you might want to brace yourself."
"Do it," Set insisted.
I sent a right cross flying at Set's face. I tried not to put *everything* I had into it, but the shock of my punch still sent Set flying into the tree behind him. I was a little worried I'd gone too far, but Set laughed as he rolled along the ground. Had my blow knocked him senseless?!
When I ran up to Set, I realized from his expression that he wasn't punch-drunk at all. He grinned up at me with the same smile I remembered on my father—a smile that carried hope for the future.
Smile through it all, and keep moving forward. I read that message in Set's broad grin.

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"You sure this is what you want?"
"Yeah," said Set. "We can't live in that village anymore. This is where we want to be."
I'd arrived once more in Tetra, this time with Set and his daughter in tow. Set had decided to leave the village once and for all. With the buildings and population decimated, there was no way that barren place could persist as a functioning community. On top of that, the surviving villagers hadn't even begun to rebuild before they started showering Set with abuse. Their flimsy excuse for their hostility was that Set's house had been the only home left standing. That had been the last straw. Set's father was dead, and with the village destroyed, there was no need for anyone to inherit the position.
A grim conclusion. Yet, from where I stood, Set wore the relieved look of a man finally freed.
"What will you do now?" I asked.
"I'll look for work somewhere here in Tetra. Oh, that reminds me. This is yours." Set passed me my reward for the monster hunt. Ten measly silver coins, the total collected wealth of our hometown.
I shook my head. "You keep it. I don't need it."
"Fate, I can't let you do that."
"Then keep it for your daughter. I'm not hurting for money."
"Thank you, Fate… To be honest, you're doing us another lifesaving favor."
The two of them were starting new lives in Tetra, and there was much they needed to do. I knew how hard it was to start from nothing. I had borne that struggle myself in Seifort. Typical living costs didn't come close to the

expense of hiring adventurers, but Set and his daughter needed every coin they had to get back on their feet.

We talked a little while longer, but morning turned to afternoon, and the time came for us to part ways. I needed to find a cart to carry me farther south. If I couldn't find one before evening, I'd be stuck in Tetra another day, and Lady Roxy's army would outpace me. I couldn't let that happen.

"Farewell, Set."

"Until next time," Set said, and he and his daughter waved goodbye.

Next time, eh? Maybe so. But, if we wanted a next time, we would each have to make it ourselves. I waved farewell to the two of them, and, with a sliver of sadness in my heart, put Tetra behind me.

Chapter 6:
A Girl and Her Wrath

I HITCHED A RIDE from Tetra with a cargo wagon headed for the next city. The weather was so beautiful and clear that, after my gargoyle-filled sleepless night, I couldn't help but yawn.

"Hey, sleepyhead… You sure you can defend us?"

"Sorry," I muttered.

I'd agreed to act as guard for the duration of our journey. While I would have agreed in exchange for the ride, I'd been assured an additional payment of three silver for seeing the middle-aged merchant and his load safely to his destination. So, hell, why not? I was confident in my ability to handle run-of-the-mill bandits and monsters.

On the other hand, if a crowned beast showed up—one of those rare monsters with names and special skills—

the smartest tactic would be to make the merchant drop his cargo and make a break for it.

"How strong are you anyway, young man?" the merchant called back again. "I gotta say, you don't look all that tough."

"I can handle myself," I said. "I'd say I'm about as strong as a rookie holy knight."

The merchant bellowed with laughter at my reply, doubling over and clutching his stomach. He shook so hard that he yanked the reins and scared his horses. "Oh, you're a riot! The same level as a holy knight?! You shouldn't go saying that crap out loud, especially not where we're headed."

"Why's that?"

"Because the city we're going to—Lanchester—it's holy knight territory. They hear you talking like that, and they'll lop your head off for disrespect. Your loose tongue could even get *me* into trouble!"

Off with both *our heads, huh?* Just imagining laws that draconian sent a shiver down my spine. I made a mental note to watch my tongue around any holy knights I met. When we arrived in Lanchester, I'd need lodgings and a place to relax. My time in Tetra had turned out to be anything but relaxing. I'd visited home, yes, but that ended with me taking on a ravenous swarm of bloodthirsty gargoyles. This time, I wanted to avoid any unnecessary fights—outside of any feeding I needed to do, of course.

"What better way to test your strength than against a holy knight?" Greed chuckled. "Bring one down, then sleep the deep sleep of the Gluttonous. That's the life, I tell you."

"If I did that, sleep would be out of the question! All the city's guards would be after us."

“You’re not thinking big enough, Fate. If that happens, you take the whole city. Conquer it. Then you make the whole city your bed and sleep that sweet sleep of the Gluttonous. I’m telling you, that’s the life!”
“That’s the greediest version of a good night’s sleep I’ve ever heard of.”
Just as I was tiring of Greed’s outlandish schemes, the wagon came to a grating halt along a mountain road. Huge boulders bordered us on both sides.
Hm? What’s going on?
I glanced about the area. Men stood on the jagged rocks. Lots of men. They all brandished weapons with an eager glint in their eyes that made it clear they were not here to be our friends. I checked behind us to find that, sure enough, the men had blocked off the path by which we’d come as well. Bandits. We were surrounded. By the grins on their faces, it was clear they’d been waiting for us.
This was bad… I hadn’t even noticed the ambush. Some bodyguard I was. Well, it wasn’t too late to get the upper hand. I unsheathed Greed from his scabbard and jumped down from the cart, ready to defend my client.
I quickly scanned the nearby men with Identify. Their stats weren’t anything to worry about, but like the gargoyles, there were more than thirty of them. If I had to take the bandits on one by one, I might not be able to protect the merchant.
I could use Greed’s First Level secret technique, Bloody Ptarmigan, to take them all out at once…but the sheer power of that attack would be a massacre, and it’d take out this section of the road with the bandits. I wanted to avoid that if I could, and not just for our journey’s sake either. These bandits were out to steal from us, yes, but I didn’t want to become the kind of cold-blooded killer who slaughtered people at first sight, no questions asked.
As I tried to formulate my battle strategy, the merchant grabbed hold of me and wailed. “We’re dead! We’re so dead! Fate, you’re as strong as a holy knight, right?! Right?! Do something!”
“I will, but you have to let go of me so I can fight!”
One bandit sneered down at us from his boulder and cackled. Their leader, by my guess.
“Did you hear that, fellas?” he said. “This skinny young’n says he’s as strong as a holy knight. That’s so stupid, it’s funny. I think these guys’re so scared, they’ve lost their little minds.”
The surrounding bandits laughed. They’d done this before. They flaunted their advantage to intimidate their victims. As if on cue, the merchant quaked with fear. I was afraid that, with a little more pressure, he might wet himself.
No more time to hesitate. My mind was made up. These bandits clearly intended to kill us. In that case, why was I still worried about killing them first?

As I started transforming the black sword into the black bow, the bandit leader shouted from upon his rock. “Your prey shivers in fear! Everybody in! Kill them!”
They’re coming! I readied myself for their attack.
Instead, there was an unexpected interruption. Explosions tore through the air, punctuated by bandit screams.
“Aaaaaaahhh! What the hell is that?!”
The very boulders upon which the bandits perched crumbled beneath their feet. I knocked away pieces of flying rock and fought off stray bandits as I defended the merchant and his wagon. What the hell was suddenly shattering these massive rocks?
The reason made itself clear soon enough.
“It’s…a girl?!”
The figure of a young woman appeared, striding over shards of fallen rock with an expression of pure calm. Her skin was tan, her body decorated with white tattoos. The giant black axe she carried didn’t match her petite frame at all.
I’d seen her before. She was the Galian girl I’d briefly met at Lady Roxy Hart’s family estate.
The once confident bandits now flailed on the ground around the girl, their arms and legs broken, sprained, or twisted at odd angles. The girl appeared entirely uninterested in them. She didn’t even glance in their direction. Instead, she stepped on any of the wounded men in her way, as if they were merely part of the road she walked. The bandits may as well have been pebbles on a stone path.
Behind me, I heard more shouting. These shrieks of fear belonged to the remaining bandits, the ones who had blocked off the road behind our wagon. The destruction unfolding before them, caused by one emotionless, white-haired girl, was more than they could handle; they ran off screaming like frightened rabbits.
The Galian girl slowly walked to the front of the wagon, staring at me the entire time. She stopped directly in front of us and did not budge.
The merchant, who clearly didn’t want to stay here even a second longer than he had to, called out to her. “Er… Thank you so much for saving us, Miss. I’d really very much like to leave immediately, so…would you mind stepping aside?”
“If you give me a ride, I’ll do it.”
I suspected that if the merchant didn’t agree, we’d end up one more shattered wreck on the road. This was less a request and more of an order. Threat emanated from her like an aura: *If you don’t let me on, I can’t be sure what this axe might do next...*
The merchant immediately capitulated. “Uh… Of course. Please, hop on board. You’ve uh…you’ve got some real guts, girl. You look so young, but you wield such unbelievable power!”

A perfect example of hitching a ride via intimidation. But the frightening aura probably didn't matter to the merchant so long as his journey went peacefully. Much better to let the girl ride on his wagon than to lose all his goods to her wrath. After all, she'd demonstrated an amazing strength. At this point, she probably seemed more helpful than I did.

I took in the bandits left lying on the road. They were scattered across the ground, moaning and twitching. None seemed dead, but all of them had broken something. *Maybe take this as a lesson and give up banditry*, I thought, and returned my gaze to the girl.

With a cute grunt, she swung her black axe onto the cart.

"Whoa!"

The wagon tilted wildly due to the immense heaviness of the axe.

"You're going to break the wagon! Get it off! Please, get it off!" the merchant shouted.

"Oh, right," the girl said. "Sloth, it's okay now. You can go back to normal."

The girl gently tapped the black axe, and the wagon suddenly stopped tilting. She'd apparently done something—magic, perhaps?—to adjust the weight of the weapon from "insane" to merely "absurd." The merchant laughed awkwardly at this unimaginable sight.

But, to me, it was not entirely unimaginable. That black axe of hers struck me as eerily similar to my own weapon. Greed had the ability to transform into a sword, magic bow, and scythe. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that there were also magical weapons that could change their weight.

At any rate, the wagon could well have toppled over and collapsed, so it was a relief to see it wouldn't when the girl set the newly lightened axe down. She jumped into the wagon and took a seat—right next to me.

"We meet again," she said.

"Indeed…" I replied.

This meeting didn't feel like chance. Frankly, it felt like an ambush—like this strange girl had been waiting for me the way the bandits had been lying in wait for passing merchants.

As if sensing my suspicions, the girl spoke. "I'm Myne. I had a feeling you'd be heading to Galia around now. I still don't know your name. Will you tell me?"

I couldn't put my finger on its source, but a strange weight, almost like her odd axe's power, radiated from Myne. She spoke quietly, soft in tone, but behind her words I sensed a tension, one that suggested a failure to meet her requests would be met with scornful fury…

I wondered whether it was Myne's eyes that put me on edge. They were a deep, warning red that forced me to avert my gaze. Her crimson eyes reminded me of the unending pit of hunger into which I feel whenever Gluttony dropped me into a starvation state.

"Are you listening? What's your name?" she asked.

"I'm Fate Graphite."

"I'll remember that. Fate of Gluttony."

What?! My eyes widened just the smallest bit. But I haven't said anything about Gluttony yet!
Myne leaned close to me, so the merchant couldn't hear what she said next. "Of course I recognize another bearer of a Skill of Mortal Sin. The fact that you don't simply shows how new you are to this."
"I see… You say 'another'; what's your skill, then?"
"I'm a bearer of Wrath. It's in the same class of skills. Has Greed told you nothing of this?"
Myne tilted her head to the side, staring accusingly at the black sword. No, Greed hadn't said a thing. In fact, I was fairly certain he made a point of not telling me more than he absolutely had to. I gripped the hilt of the black sword and tried asking him directly about Myne's words, but my question was met with silence. In fact, ever since the bandit attack earlier, Greed had been silent.
Was the braggart black sword pretending to be asleep?
Skills of Mortal Sin… Wrath… Was the power Myne wielded similar to Gluttony? I wanted to ask, but just as I worked up my nerve, the merchant poked his head back to check on us. As long as he was around, I suspected it was a bad idea to chat about the subject any more than we already had, no matter how curious I was.
Despite my silence, Myne seemed to catch the curiosity in my eyes. "You'll learn more about me in time, Fate. Besides, you still owe me for my last favor. Until you pay me back, we'll be traveling together."
Her last favor? Did she mean the kobolds at the Hart family estate? Back then, our only interaction had been when she said she'd give me the kobolds, and that I owed her one for them. I'd battled the kobolds, completely annihilating them and the valley they came from, and…had essentially gotten her blamed for the damage, since she'd been a foreigner glimpsed passing through that day.
So yeah, okay. Any way you sliced it, I definitely owed her one.
"I don't know if traveling with me is a good idea," I said. "I'm going to Galia."
"I know. That's where I'm going, too, so it's perfect. We'll go to Galia, and you can pay me back there."
Myne's words made it seem as if it was my choice, but her intense stare said, You don't get a say in this, by the way. If you refuse, there's still time for you to meet the same end as those bandits.
In any case, Myne and I were heading in the same direction for now, and there really was a lot I still wanted to know. Traveling with her struck me as a good idea, threatening aura or not.
"Okay. Together, then."
"Great. I'm counting on you, Fate."

With that, Myne dropped immediately into a deep sleep beside me. The speed with which she fell asleep astounded me. I recalled something Greed had once said, that first-rate adventurers learned to rest whenever the opportunity arose. If that was true, Myne was probably a couple levels above first-rate. If there was a speed-sleeping contest, she would win hands down.

And then there was her mysterious skill, the Mortal Sin of Wrath… She had pulverized towering boulders, along with the bandits who stood on them, without breaking a sweat. From what I could tell, she didn't pull any punches against anyone she considered an enemy. However, her peaceful, sleeping face showed not even the slightest hint of her furious fighting style.

Seeing that my conversation with Myne was over, the merchant glanced at me with relief. "Doesn't look so scary when she's sleeping, huh? But, uh…is she a friend of yours? You gotta tell me if you know her."

"Not a friend, no. We've crossed paths before, but other than that, she's a stranger."

"Even so, at least she's friendly to *you*. Did you see the way she looked at *me*? Almost pissed myself on the spot…"

The wagon rumbled along. Though I was on edge the entire ride, I was thankful that we didn't encounter any more bandits or monsters. The rest of the journey passed so peacefully that I had to wonder if the quiet was the lull before an oncoming storm.

"Hey, look, you can see it!" The merchant pointed ahead. "That city over there is where we're going. Lanchester! It's run by a holy knight."

"Whoa…"

From the outside, Lanchester looked as strong and sturdy as the Kingdom of Seifort itself. It was a fortress surrounded by towering white walls, as if the city itself were a gleaming reflection of the very holy knights who governed it.

Chapter 7:
A Well-Governed City

THE SOARING WHITE WALLS surrounding Lanchester looked down, judging us from on high. Compared to Tetra and Seifort, this city had an icy aura that extended to the buildings themselves, a feeling that anything outside of the holy knights' rules and beliefs was rejected with prejudice. I guessed that sort of strict attitude was to be expected of a city directly governed by a holy knight.

The merchant wagon trundled through the city's colossal main gates. Outside, the walls had towered. The gate had soared. Inside, the buildings loomed. And there were so *many* of them. Even from the road, their size was overwhelming; up close, those buildings were truly majestic to behold. However, within the city itself, the same towering white walls partitioned Lanchester into sections. Even Seifort, with its strict district classifications, didn't go so far to demarcate spaces. On top of that, the gates into each district of Lanchester were heavily guarded.

"This place… It's like everything is locked down," I said.

"Well, Lanchester's holy knights have a pretty strict class system in place for residents," the merchant replied.

According to him, a person's skill decided their class, like so:

Holy Skills: Holy Knights

Attack Skills: Adventurers

Production and/or Commercial Skills: Artisans, Merchants, etc.

All Remaining Obscure and/or Unnecessary Skills: Servants

Because the holy knights ruled the city, they were, of course, at the top of the food chain—just like in Seifort. Next in line were adventurers, who had the ability to battle monsters, a constant problem for a territory so close to Galia. After adventurers came the artisans, capable of designing and forging weapons and armor for the top two classes, along with the merchants who traded in such goods. Those three classes consisted of people lucky enough to have been blessed with the right skills at birth.

At the bottom of this class system languished people with skills deemed obscure or unnecessary: skills that had no real use, or that were meaningless on their own. Stat-Boosting skills were one of those, since if you had a Magic Boost (Low) but no magic skills for it to increase, the skill was pointless. And, though Strength Boost (Low) enabled someone to battle low-level monsters without a Sword or Spear Technique skill, the holy knights restricted exactly which skills qualified a person to be an adventurer. They wouldn't recognize anybody who failed to fit their mold as such.

I was relieved from the very bottom of my heart that I hadn't been born here, even though my village had been a special kind of latrine. At least I'd

been able to make it to Seifort, where people could—in theory—work whatever job they liked. If I'd been born in Lanchester, my father wouldn't have been able to protect me. The holy knights would've discovered that my skill was simply being hungry, and I might not even have qualified for the servant class. I'd have been driven out at as a child, though I feared it would have been worse.

At any rate, I could easily imagine them saying an eternally hungry child was a disgusting excuse for a citizen. The entire system reminded me of my time working as a day-laborer, gatekeeping for the Vlerick family. The difference between Lanchester and the Vlericks, however, was that the city abused people on a much larger scale.

"Are travelers subject to the same class system?" I asked.

The merchant laughed. "No, not at all. If we were, nobody'd ever come through, and trade would freeze up. That'd be real bad for Lanchester's economy!"

"That makes sense… I have to admit, I'm relieved to hear it."

"Well, you and your scary little dozin' friend are both adventurers. So, even if you decided to become citizens, you'd probably have it pretty good."

At least Lanchester was kind to some. In the end, however, an adventurer's whole job was fighting monsters. I had a feeling that, when it came down to it, that job would include being part of a human wall at the behest of Lanchester's holy knight commanders. After all, the holy knights had created the entire class system in the first place. I doubted they spared much care for any of the people below them.

"I'm just passing through, so I don't think I'll be here long," I said.

"Well, just don't forget what I told you! No bad-mouthing any holy knights, you hear?"

"Yeah, I remember. Thanks for the warning."

When the wagon came to a halt, a few city officials approached, probably to discuss trade conditions.

"Hey," said the merchant. "Don't forget your reward. Three silver coins, as promised."

"Thanks. Perhaps we'll meet again somewhere down the road."

"If we do, I'll be counting on you for more bodyguard work."

I didn't exactly like the idea of taking money for doing nothing, but it was the nature of the job. Guard work wasn't always fighting and protecting—sometimes, being present was all that mattered. The important thing was that the cargo arrived safely at its destination. On reflection, perhaps I'd developed a skewed perspective on the adventurer's lifestyle, since I constantly had to fight and kill to keep my Gluttony sated.

Anyway, it was time to wake up the still sleeping Myne.

"Hey, we're here," I said.

She mumbled back, but barely stirred. "Just need…one more day."

"One more day?! Just how much sleep do you need?! Hey, wake up!"

Just as I was about to lean over and shake Myne back to the land of the living, Greed broke his long silence.
“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. She doesn’t take kindly to having her beauty sleep interrupted. Make her angry, and you’ll be in deep trouble.”
“Deep trouble? Like what?”
“Oh—if she got really mad? She could raze this city to the ground. She’s top-class when it comes to Skills of Mortal Sin, you know. That’s blink-and-you’ll-miss-it levels of instantaneous destructive power. You’ll have to carry her. And don’t forget to bring her weapon, Sloth. Losing that would be another great way to make her angry.”
Just how terrifying was this girl’s fury?! She was hells of daunting if even Greed approached her with caution. At least he’d finally spoken to me again.
“Hey, Greed,” I said. “Do you and Myne know each other?”
“We go back a long way, though I wish we didn’t. I was surprised to see her still alive. Always was stubborn. Really, she should know better than to try and get back what’s already lost…”
“What are you talking about?”
“Hmph. I don’t know. I don’t care. It’s got nothing to do with me. I don’t want any part of it.”
Greed dropped back into grim silence. I guessed that, if I wanted to know more, I’d have to ask Myne herself. But Greed’s words also seemed to hint that if I did know, I’d get pulled into a whole heap of other trouble I couldn’t even begin to imagine. Well, it was too late to worry about getting into trouble. I’d already told Myne I’d help her out. And I owed her.
Did this trouble Greed was muttering about have to do with our Skills of Mortal Sin? The way Myne spoke about the skills implied there were more out there besides hers and mine. She had also mentioned that the bearers of these skills could recognize each other. Maybe that was part of what made it feel so right to travel with her.
Either way, I had to get to Galia. I didn’t know what Myne was looking for, or what she needed to accomplish, but I would only help her out this once. After that, we’d go our separate ways; I had other priorities.
I hefted Myne onto my back. As I suspected, my Telepathy had no effect on her. It had been the same when I tried to Identify her back at the Hart family estate. My skills didn’t work on this girl. I wondered if they would work on Sloth, her weapon. Did the black axe have a soul like Greed did?
I grabbed the black axe’s handle and was pleased to discover my Telepathy catching on something—some inner consciousness. But Sloth was…asleep? I tried poking the sleeping weapon, like I’d planned to poke Myne, but it didn’t wake. I heard only the gentle snoring of its slumber. I had no other ideas about how to wake it up. *What a lazy weapon!* Greed could certainly be annoying, but the black axe Sloth seemed to have just as bad an attitude in its own way.

I heard Greed laugh at me through my Telepathy. “Always and forever sleeping,” he said. “What a lazy piece of equipment.”
“We can’t wake it up? I’d like to talk to it.”
“Impossible—for you. Only the weapon’s wielder can wake it.”
So, Sloth was a weapon with its own peculiarities, kind of like Greed. That reminded me. “What are weapons like you and Sloth called, anyway?” I asked. “Tell me that much, at least.”
“Very well. We’re the Weapons of Mortal Sin. And, for the record, we’re vastly superior to those brittle toys people call ‘holy swords.’”
That much I had seen for myself when Greed snapped Hado Vlerick’s holy sword in half as if it were a twig. Greed could also wield new forms and powers when I unlocked his weapon levels. The only reason I’d come as far as I had was because of all the stats I’d fed the black sword.
Perhaps the sleeping Sloth hid a similar power. After all, it had almost splintered the merchant’s wagon with its sheer weight… But I had a feeling there was more to the axe than heft. I’d know more as soon as I had another chance to watch Myne in battle.
After the merchant and the city officials finished their talk, the cargo was unloaded from the wagon. That was when I departed, so as not to get in the way.
Carrying both Myne and her black axe kept my hands full, but fortunately, I could use Sloth’s handle to balance some of Myne’s weight. There was no way I could explore the city with Myne and Sloth in tow, so my first task would be finding lodgings.
Past the loading docks, a stone path lit by lamps on either side led farther into the city. Down the path sat a huge fountain, gushing with water. The city had to have an impressive plumbing system for that to work. In fact, from everything I’d seen so far, its infrastructure seemed well-managed. To say Lanchester rivaled Seifort was not an understatement; this was no countryside town like Tetra. It was the complete opposite of the pastoral settlements with houses scattered randomly across farmlands. Lanchester’s streets and buildings could only have been built on the foundation of logical, meticulous planning.
As I headed down the street, a couple city guards stopped me. That immediately put me on edge, especially since my hands were full with Myne and her axe. *I haven’t done anything wrong. What do they want?*
“You a traveler?” one asked.
“Yes. I’m looking for lodgings. Is there an inn?”
One guard pointed behind me.
“There’re lodgings over that way. You can find the inn there. Only district residents past this point!”
What? Guess they’re serious about enforcing exactly where visitors can travel within the city…
Both guards had black neck tattoos under their collars. Tentatively, I asked about them.

“These identify us as citizens and adventurers,” a guard replied.
“Do all Lanchester citizens have tattoos to mark their class?”
“That’s right. It’s the law. Now, head on back the way you came, or we’ll be lodging you in the dungeons.”
I turned back and walked toward the inn. I’d barely set foot in Lanchester, and already, this city was terrifyingly strict.

Chapter 8:
The Desert of Extinction

THE LODGINGS THE GUARD had pointed me toward were more than large enough to accommodate any and all passing travelers. Even from afar, the size of the place was so imposing that I hesitated to call it an inn. Since Myne and I had arrived in the evening, travelers from all over were streaming in for the night. I joined the crowd and entered the structure.
“This place is amazing.” My mouth hung open.
To ensure that nobody had to leave to get what they needed, a host of shops lined the interior. The skeptical part of me suspected that, besides their convenience, the shops kept outsiders from wandering the city. I wandered from storefront to storefront, gawking in awe, Myne steadily snoring on my back. Eventually, a member of the inn staff approached us.
“Will you be staying this evening, sir?” they asked.
“Yes. I need a room for two, please.”
“Right this way, sir.”
Impressed by the polite service, I followed the employee to a huge staircase. The building’s center was an immense lobby in which a spiraling staircase led to the upper floors. From where I stood, looking up, I couldn’t even count how many rooms there were. A hundred? Two hundred?
“Please watch your step, sir. We have you on the third floor.”
“Looks like there’s a lot of rooms. How many are there total?”
“Our amenities encompass five floors, with five hundred rooms per floor. That makes for two thousand and five hundred rooms in total.” The staff member had a practiced tone as they recited the number.
The whole operation was incredible. Not a single inn in Seifort could claim anything like two thousand rooms. Even the largest could only host maybe a thousand guests.
“Yes, we surprise everyone staying with us for the first time. This inn is the pride of Lanchester. As you may have noticed, there are some travel restrictions for people visiting from outside the city. For that reason, this inn was established to accommodate travelers and merchants during short-term stays.”
“And not so that the city can keep foreigners from causing trouble in other districts?”
“Inside the inn, lodgers are free to do as they like,” the staff member said, evading my question. “You may even keep your weapon equipped while on our premises.”
“That’s handy. Being asked to hand over my weapon would feel like being asked to strip.”
It was also likely that adventurers would just start picking fights if they were told to relinquish their weapons in order to stay at an inn in a city they

were unfamiliar with. For example, Greed had already implied that if her black axe were taken, Myne would explode in fury. She'd more than demonstrated that her rage could crush boulders. Although I didn't know the depths of the power hidden in her Wrath, I had an inkling that things would end poorly for anyone on the other side of such a rampage. In short, it was a relief to know that carrying weapons was allowed.

We climbed the stairs to the third floor. When we got to the door to my room, the staffer seemed to remember something.

"Based on your equipment, would I be correct in assuming that you're an adventurer, sir?"

The abruptness of the question put me on edge, but I nodded.

"In that case, would you consider sandman hunting during your stay, sir? The city is paying out rewards to those who do."

Those words were like the clear peals of a dinner bell for my hungry Gluttony, and the timing was perfect.

"Sounds intriguing. I'd like to learn more about that," I said, trying to suppress the sudden rumbling of my stomach. "I've got to admit that I'm starving for…uh, money. Yes. Money. Money is what I am starving for."

The staffer continued smoothly. "We're grateful for any help, sir. The sandmen are terribly active at the moment, and at present the city doesn't have enough resident adventurers to keep them under control. We often enlist outside help to boost our ranks where we can."

Sounded like they needed all the help they could get. However, even with my upgraded stats, my arms were finally tiring, so the staffer and I went into my room. I did want to learn more about the sandmen before I rushed off to battle, though. I carefully laid Myne down on the bed and set the black axe against the wall nearby. It wasn't a huge room, but there was a simple table and two chairs. The staffer and I sat down, and I quickly got up to speed on the monsters known as sandmen.

The sandmen lived in the desert east of Lanchester. Specifically, the desert was the only place they *could* live. At first, I asked why they couldn't just be left alone, but as the staffer explained, I learned that Lanchester had good reason to pour resources into culling them. Sandmen grew their own habitat by transforming greenery into desert, a process called "desertification." If you didn't keep sandman numbers under control, they'd expand and expand their territory until they turned the world to sand.

Near the desert was a forest, which was Lanchester's source of water. Wide swathes of farmland also surrounded the city. Desertification threatened the livelihoods of the farmers who lived and worked there, and in turn, threatened Lanchester itself. That was why the inn staff were so quick to recommend the task; sandman hunting was a matter of life and death for citizens of Lanchester.

I accepted the quest just as quickly as the inn employee had recommended it to me. The sandmen were nocturnal monsters, so I had to leave immediately.

“Sandmen create their bodies from the desert sand around them. Protected inside them is a red core. You can kill them by breaking or fracturing it,” the employee explained. “You’ll know they’re dead when the core turns blue. Bring those cores to the inn’s trading post, and they’ll pay you for your work. Good luck.”
The staffer bowed politely, then left.
I was headed to the desert, but…what was I going to do about Myne, who was still fast asleep? If I left without saying anything, I’d probably tick her off, but if I woke her up…she would probably also be ticked. *Okay. Time for a note.*
Dear Myne, I’m heading east of the city to hunt sandmen in the desert, I wrote.
Still holding the pen, I glanced over at Myne’s peaceful, sleeping face and had a wonderful idea. Stealthily, I drew three whiskers on both cheeks, cleanly and clearly. They were perfect. They looked good on her, too!
I left the adorably napping cat to her slumber and got ready to depart. I took Greed in hand, and he took the opportunity to once again break his silence.
“Oh, Fate. You’re like a little boy who still doesn’t understand real fear. Now that you’ve gone and put your foot in it, don’t come crying to me.”
“You’re overreacting,” I said. “It’s just a couple of whiskers. Besides, they look cute.”
If I left now, I’d arrive at the desert by nightfall. Then I remembered that Lanchester was holy knight territory. If I drew too much attention in battle, I’d end up with all sorts of trouble to juggle in the aftermath. My best bet was to hide my identity, and I had just the item for that.
I pulled the old, blackened skull mask from my bag. I hadn’t used it at all since leaving Seifort, but it contained a little spell that hid my identity. Wearing the mask under my black hooded robes, and with Greed changed from the black sword to the black scythe, I’d be the very picture of a lich. Sure, I didn’t act like one, but that didn’t matter. The effect was close enough that I could go to the desert, put on my mask, and hunt a whole feast of sandmen with none the wiser to my true identity.
Although…maybe it was about time for me to let go of the lich disguise. I wasn’t a servant of the Hart family anymore, so I didn’t need to go through the trouble of leading a double-life. Couldn’t I ditch the lich and become…
What had they called me in Seifort? The Corpse, a dangerous monster. Perhaps I could be just Corpse, the adventurer in the skull mask.
This way, I could gorge upon monster souls, and nobody would know it was me, Fate. So long as I kept to about ten targets per hunt, I’d have no trouble at the trading post when I handed in the sandman cores. I wouldn’t build up enough monster hate for anybody to get suspicious, or to induce the creation of a crowned beast either. It was perfect.
I explained my plan to Greed, but he seemed uninspired. *“Sure, if it works, it’ll be great.* If *it works…”*

“Why do you have to be so negative? We haven’t even gotten to the desert!”
I whispered goodbye to the slumbering Myne-cat and left the room. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I noticed a group of adventurers gathered in the hall, each fully equipped, like myself. Perhaps they were a sandman-hunting party. Gradually, more people arrived, until there were twenty adventurers total. They seemed to be planning a pretty large-scale hunt.
I’d have to be careful to keep my distance. I didn’t want anyone interrupting my meals. It had been a while since I could hunt freely, to my heart’s content. But…no, I’d been thinking about hunting and feasting all evening. Something deeper in me was driving my desire to feed, and I didn’t like it. I glanced into the blade of the black sword to find my eye reflected back at me. As I expected, it was now stained crimson, just like Myne’s.
Without noticing, I’d fallen halfway into Gluttony’s starvation state.
“This is bad…” I muttered. “I’ve already lost an eye to it.”
“Fate,” Greed said, “you allow Gluttony to pull you along far too easily. You need to learn to control it. To endure it. So, I have my own idea. On this hunt, try pushing yourself to the very limit of Gluttony’s half-starved state. Doing so will force you to develop techniques to control and resist its urges.”
Easy for Greed to say. Gluttony felt instinctual, an urge from deep within my body that fully overtook me. It was hard to resist. Occasionally, the hunger was so bad that I didn’t know whether it was me starving, or the Gluttony. But I had to try. If I didn’t learn how to control it, and if I couldn’t develop that control over time, Gluttony would take everything from me. Slavering, thoughtless, it would force me to lash out. Of everything I still didn’t know about my skill, that was the one fact I was certain of.
“You have to find a balance. A way to confront the urges of your Gluttony. If you don’t, then sooner rather than later, you will lose yourself to it.”
Greed’s words weighed heavily on my mind.

Chapter 9:
Wielding Extra Impact

I FOLLOWED THE LARGE HUNTING PARTY from a distance. My reasoning was simple: I wanted to see how the twenty adventurers fought together. At the same time, I had to make sure they didn't spot me; in my cloak and skull mask, I was the very portrait of suspicious. If the adventurers caught me following them, they might view me as a monster and try to attack.

All the same, I wanted to see the party in action with my own eyes. I wanted to see teamwork between people who covered each other's weaknesses and boosted each other's strengths. I was always doing everything by myself, so I hoped this would teach me something.

Observing the adventurers in action would also be a chance to train Gluttony's endurance. I needed to make sure I could resist my Gluttonous urges when a monster was right in front of me. It felt a little like training a dog by putting food in front of it, except in this case, the food belonged to someone else. I was a little worried that Gluttony might go mad with rage at being denied, but I was also confident I could handle it. I was only in a *half*-starved state, after all.

The night was dim and gloomy from thick cloud cover, but the adventurers walked on without a single torch. There was no way all of them had Night Vision, so what was going on?

"It's like your skull mask," Greed said. "They're probably decked out in magical equipment. There's no small number of nocturnal monsters out there, and hunting them requires Night Vision or other similar skills. Vast amounts of magical equipment were crafted thousands of years ago in Galia, and now all that junk's just floating around out in the world. Because the crafting methods have been lost to time, they're considered high-quality goods, so they're not always easy to get hold of."

"I guess it doesn't matter for me, since I'm constantly adding to my skill collection," I said, "but for ordinary adventurers, getting the right equipment must be essential. They must really burn through their budget."

When I thought about it, the entirety of my battle equipment was the black sword Greed. The only reason I wore the skull mask was to hide my identity.

"You think I should get more equipment, Greed?"

The black sword laughed. "Don't bother with trinkets. You have Gluttony, so you can hoard all the skills and stats you want. Other adventurers can't do that, so they have to rely on magical gear."

In other words, it was stupid to buy gear to strengthen myself when I could devour the soul of any monster with a useful skill to claim. I had to agree with Greed. That was sound logic.

At the same time, collecting an assortment of magical gear struck me as pretty cool. I tried to explain this to Greed, but he snorted and laughed.

“So, you want to travel the lands with a collection of useless garbage? It’ll just get in your way. All you need on your journey is me, the mighty black sword Greed!”

It was true that I couldn’t imagine losing Greed, especially now that I’d unlocked his Second Level. But I wasn’t about to admit that to the weapon himself. Praise would go straight to his head…so to speak.

I touched my sole piece of magical equipment: my skull mask. I had to take care of it, because I’d be hiding my identity from here on—especially in front of Lady Roxy. If I reunited with her in Galia, it would be as the adventurer Corpse.

To get to Galia, I’d consume every monster in my path. There was no other way. But I didn’t want Lady Roxy to see me as a ravenous killer. If she couldn’t accept me… If she shunned me… Would any of this be worth it? I couldn’t fight with the weight of her disdain on my shoulders. So, I hid it all behind the skull mask.

“If you lose yourself to the mask, Fate, you’ll create a rift in your heart that Gluttony will seize. The only thing you can truly count on is me, the mighty black sword Greed!”

“All right, all right, I get it,” I said. “I’m counting on you.”

The black sword laughed. “Stand tall when you say it, boy!”

I just hoped I wasn’t standing on quicksand. Greed had a bad habit of talking big. When I unlocked the Second Level, he’d told me that the black scythe could eliminate anything. Then it turned out to only work on skill-based phenomena. Although that was powerful in its own right, the point still stood: if I just believed everything Greed bragged about, I’d pay for it later in pain.

I continued to tail the adventuring party at a distance while Greed’s laughter echoed in my head. As we marched onward, the ground beneath our feet gave way from tawny grasslands to coarse desert sand.

“This place is big,” I said. “It’s all desert as far as the horizon.”

“The sandmen have spent many long, long years expanding their turf. Another thousand years and they’ll probably turn this whole area into desert.”

A thousand years… The scale was hard to wrap my head around. I’d be long gone by then. But I was excited to visit the desert for the first time. As I knelt in the sand to make a few piles, the adventurers readied themselves for battle.

“It’s starting, Fate,” said Greed.

I stood, abandoning my towers of sand to time. “Let’s see what these guys are made of.”

I watched the adventurers at work and soon realized they had built their party around magic. The core group consisted of five fire-magic spellcasters. Fire spells were how they brought down the sandmen. The rest of the party was made up of ten shield bearers who herded the sandmen

together, and a group of five sword and spear wielders drew the attention of any sandman that acted unexpectedly.
The party fought like a well-oiled machine. They herded the sandmen into a cluster, then set them ablaze with fire magic. From my vantage point, they made it look easy, but it only looked so clean because they were so skilled. They wasted no movements, intimately familiar with the rhythm and flow of their work.
As I looked on in awe, Greed's yawn cut through my Telepathy. "How very dull," he said. "They just repeat the same thing over and over. I can't stand it."
"What would you suggest instead?"
"That we just blow this whole place sky-high, sandmen and desert alike. Boom!"
How stupid. It made me think back to destroying the valley at the Hart family estate. I'd annihilated the entire place, then had to deal with all the aftermath. How would blowing the sandmen to pieces help me develop control over my half-starved state?!
"What happened to the sword who was nagging me about building endurance? If we go over the top this early, we'll satisfy my Gluttony in one go."
"All right, cool down," said Greed. "It's just my preference. I wasn't saying we should actually do it. In any case, isn't it about time we started on our own sandman hunt?"
Greed didn't want me to hunt the sandmen like I usually did goblins. Instead of pursuing them one after another, he suggested that I leave a gap between each kill. Hunt a sandman, then wait, endure, and control the pulsing impulses of half-fed Gluttony before I hunted another.
Even now, standing and watching the adventurers at work, I felt the waves of Gluttonous hunger nearly wash me away. I supposed it was about time for me to hunt my first sandman. I left the adventurers to their fiery harvest and walked off into the desert. After crossing a few sand dunes, I discovered a sandman on its own and used Identify on it immediately.

Sandman, Lv 30
Vitality: 1,760
Strength: 890
Magic: 1,330
Spirit: 1,760
Agility: 100
Skills: Spirit Boost (Medium)

The sandman was a touch stronger than a gargoyle noa, and its slug-like movements already told me everything I needed to know about its abysmal Agility. As long as I didn't screw up too badly, the sandman wouldn't be able to touch me.

As for a plan of attack, I'd already seen the hunting party use fire magic to take sandmen down, so I guessed the monsters were weak against fire. That made this a good opportunity to try out the Fireball spell I'd consumed from the gargoyles.

I had a feeling I was still out of range, but all the same, I held my left hand out toward the sandman and muttered the spell's incantation. *"Fireball!"*

As soon as I uttered the word, a crimson ball of flame gathered in front of my palm.

It seemed that spells took a little while to cast. When the fireball stopped growing, I aimed it at the sandman and fired.

"Huh?!"

Greed burst into laughter. "Oh, man… Fate… That's the worst aim I've seen in decades! There's nothing over there!"

My fireball hadn't even reached the sandman, not even close. Instead, the fireball flung itself off into the dunes. Empty sand burst into flame as the fireball landed well to the side of both me and the sandman. The sandman noticed my miss too, and turned to begin its slow crawl toward me. Still, the monster was slow enough that I had time to try casting again.

"What's wrong, Fate? So hungry that you can't aim straight?"

"Go on, laugh if you want. I don't care. This is my first spell ever. *Ever*. Mistakes happen. But I'll get him this time…"

Greed must have noticed something in my voice, because he stopped laughing. *"Hm. Let me help you out. Change me into the magic bow."*

I transformed Greed into the black bow and aimed it toward the sandman.

"You want me to fire at it like this? The same way we always do?"

"No. Cast Fireball before you release the arrow."

I pulled back on the bow and watched as an arrow formed upon the string. Usually, I would fire it at this point, but Greed had recommended a new step. I formed the incantation *fireball* in my mind, and the head of the black arrow burst into flame.

"Whoa. This arrow…is it a fire arrow now?!"

"You can imbue the arrows of this bow with your magic. In other words, you can use elemental attacks based on the skills you acquire."

Also, this flame manifested far more quickly than the one I had conjured in my hand. In other words, I could fire elemental arrows in quick succession—no wizard could do that. I released the arrow, and it flew as true as they always did, guided by Greed straight into my target's head.

"How's that feel?"

"It's amazing!" I cried. "And a bull's-eye!"

As I watched the sandman disintegrate into flame before me, I decided there was no need for me to use magic like a traditional spellcaster. From now on, I'd just wield magic using the black bow—a far better fit for me.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +1,760, Strength +890, Magic +1,330, Spirit +1,760, Agility +100. New skill added: Spirit Boost (Medium).

I closed my eyes as the tiny sliver of sandman soul satiated my Gluttony. Now, it was time to take a break from the hunt and try to endure the hunger. *Control* it.

If I managed this—and if I did it again, over and over—could I really train myself to fend off the ravenous, berserk rage that overcame me whenever I failed to feed myself in my half-starved state?

For now, I had no choice but to put my faith in Greed’s advice.

Chapter 10:
The Fearsome Beast of the Sandstorm

I COLLAPSED INTO THE SAND, my arms and legs splayed akimbo. I was drained, but not by physical exhaustion. This fatigue was entirely mental. Resisting the urges of Gluttony and only picking at the souls of the sandmen took real endurance. It was like being parched to the bone, but only allowing yourself a tiny drop of water at a time, and leaving long, long gaps between each drop. On top of that, I'd been at it for hours.

"Greed, don't you think it's about time I ate my fill?" I said. "I'd really like to get back to the city before dawn."

"I will admit, you've done an admirable job for your first time. Besides, I don't want you actually going crazy from hunger. Let's call it a night for this training session."

Now that I had my coach's permission, it was time to gorge. I still had a few hours before dawn broke, more time than I needed to satisfy Gluttony. I turned to search deep in the desert.

I was still in my half-starved state, so my senses were boosted, my one red eye gleaming with eagerness for the hunt. I put my nose in the air. I could smell where the sandmen lurked.

"To the north," I said. "Three sandmen, not far from here."

"You've learned to use your improved senses, I see. That sensitivity only comes from prolonged periods in your half-starved state," said Greed.

I *was* getting used to it. In that condition, one of my eyes turned red, but the intimidation effect that accompanied full starvation didn't activate. At full starvation, anyone who met my gaze froze in place, so long as their stats were lower than mine. I had to admit, that would have been pretty handy when I was half-starved too.

I headed north and immediately spotted my prey. The three sandmen were half-submerged in the sand, studying their surroundings. They were probably on guard because I'd hunted quite a few of them already. I wasn't sure how many, though… I'd stopped counting after the fiftieth.

Perhaps if you hunted far enough past the hate threshold, instead of aggressive, monsters grew cautious and fearful. That could be a problem. I intended to eat my fill of their souls, but I couldn't properly hunt them if they fled into the sand when I approached.

I guessed I would need to hunt another thirty sandmen to satiate Gluttony in my current state. Including the three right in front of me, that left twenty-seven. It was imperative that I take the sandmen down before they escaped, so tonight's feast started here. I readied the black bow, set my magic arrow aflame, and loosed.

A pillar of fire erupted from the burning sandman. The other two saw the arrow strike and attempted to burrow into the sand, but they would not escape. I'd already fired my next two arrows.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +5,280, Strength +2,670, Magic +3,990, Spirit +5,280, Agility +300.

I gazed at the three scorching pillars as I listened to the drone of the metallic voice. But I was not satisfied. It would take another twenty-seven at least…
If only there was something bigger, something that could satisfy me in one hit… Just as I thought that, I climbed another sand dune, and a delicious scent drifting in the air struck me. I'd experienced a similar scent on an earlier hunt. It was the same tantalizing aroma possessed by the soul of the crowned beast I'd slain on the Hart family estate.
"Greed," I said, "I think we've found ourselves a crowned beast."
"Oho. A monster with a unique name. What a perfect main dish! And it means you can practice controlling Gluttony's ecstasy when it devours a hearty soul. Two birds with one stone! None of that writhing on the ground in insane bliss this time, you hear?"
"I don't… Look, I don't like to remember that very much. Kind of a painful memory. Anyway, let's put the results of tonight's training to good use."
Following the delectable scent, I closed in on the monster. As I did, I heard the sound of a fierce battle. Was someone fighting the crowned beast already? I approached cautiously and quietly, and found that indeed, somebody was. And not one person, but many.
"That's the hunting party we followed earlier," I said.
"Hm. Doesn't look good for them. At this rate, they're headed for a total wipe."
The party of adventurers was trapped by an immense monster composed of rocks and sand—nearly a living sandstorm. They had nowhere to run, and six of them were injured. Five shield bearers held the front line, defending against the monster's attacks. However, their shields were fractured and cracked, splintering under the force of the crowned beast's heavy blows. The shield bearers' skills seemed to include a defense buff, but their shields were the skill's core mechanism. In other words, without shields, their buffs were useless, and as soon as their shields broke, everyone in the party was a goner.
Something stirred in my heart as I watched them battle. This was a group of people who refused to leave their friends behind. A group that fought to overcome the impossible together. Some of these adventurers could survive if they fled, giving up on their friends, and yet, for them, such a cowardly plan was so unthinkable that it didn't exist.
"They're so cool," I said.
"You jealous?"

I shrugged. “It’s whatever. Shall we get in there, Greed?”
“Oh? You want to help them?”
“No… I just want to fill my stomach.”
I knew from watching the hunting party in battle that I couldn’t fight amongst them. If the battle became truly deadly, I might lose control and end up devouring them as well. Teamwork had no place in my style of fighting: Gluttony and Greed. I could only ever hope to fight alongside other warriors who wielded Skills of Mortal Sin…like Myne.
Dashing onto the battlefield, I aimed my black bow at the crowned beast, summoning arrow after arrow to my hand. First, I needed to draw the monster away from the exhausted shield bearers. I fired five fire arrows at the feet of the beast. The monster’s legs burst alight as the arrows hit, and it stumbled in place.
“Let’s see how it likes some pressure up close and personal!”
“Make sure you equip the black sword at close range.”
“I was planning on it, jeez!”
I transformed Greed from the black bow to the black sword, closing in on the crowned beast. Finally in range, I used Identify. It was time to get familiar with my prey.

[The Eye of the Sandstorm]
Sand Golem, Lv 60
Vitality: 450,000
Strength: 430,000
Magic: 245,000
Spirit: 265,000
Agility: 115,000
Skills: Sandstorm (Spell)

This crowned beast was as tough as it looked. I’d expected high stats the moment I saw the colossal construct. Strength and vitality were definitely the areas where it excelled. Given its six-figure stats, I was impressed the shield bearers had survived the crowned beast’s onslaught as long as they had. Aside from their personal skills, their shields might also be equipped with some kind of skill or buff. Truthfully, I wanted to ask them all about their skills and strategy, but I doubted I’d ever get the chance. Anyway, I had priorities.
I dove toward the front line, scattering the shield bearers with my speed. My impact sent the other adventurers flying off the battlefield. Their voices trailed away into the distance as they fell out of the beast’s range.
“What the…?!”
“What are you—?! Ahhh!”
“No way! Whoa…!”
“What are you planning, you—?! You…! Argh!”
“Aahhh!”

Oops. One shield bearer was a woman. I hoped I hadn't been too aggressive. All the same, I had at least managed to put myself between the hunting party and the sand golem. Then I heard a voice call out from behind me.
"You there, in the strange garb! Are you an adventurer? Do you intend to help us in our battle?"
The voice likely belonged to the party's leader. He shouted more questions at me. No time to answer. I simply shook my head.
"Then why are you here?" His voice was hesitant, confused.
But I'd known my true motive the moment I arrived at the battle. My aims were simple.
I fought to satisfy Gluttony.
"My reasons are my own," I said. "This monster belongs to me. I recommend you and your friends get out of here, and quickly."
"I can't just let you fight it alone. Listen, there's no need to play lone wolf. This beast cannot be taken lightly. Your chances are best if we fight together."
I could see where he was coming from. The adventurers wanted to overcome this sandman as a team, as friends. I'd suspected they might say something like this. But the truth of the matter was they would only get in my way. I was no good at protecting others in the heat of battle. I'd learned that fighting the gargoyles in my village. Small numbers I could manage, but ten or twenty people? That was a different story. They'd die due to my inexperience.
Behind me stood the hunting party of twenty adventurers, six of whom were injured and unable to fight. If the sand golem launched an area-of-effect attack, I would only be able to defend those directly in my own line of fire.
I watched the sand golem closely, but allowed myself the shortest sliver of a glance back at the adventurers. "I appreciate the offer, but you'll only get in my way. Now get out of here before you get pulled into the storm. Otherwise you'll all be sleeping in the sand tonight." I turned back to watch the sand golem for movement.
After a moment's pause, the party leader spoke again. "Fine!" he shouted. "But, please, don't do anything too rash!"
The sand golem had grown impatient during our chat. It lumbered closer and launched an attack at its biggest threat: me. As I leapt out of the way, I noted the hunting party escaping into the distance. Now, I could finally fight freely. I'd put an end to this beast quickly. I had to.
After all, I needed to get back to the inn before Myne woke up and noticed her whiskers.
I held the black sword Greed in a low guard and launched myself at the heart of the crowned sand golem.

Chapter 11:
Crimson Thunder

LIKE ITS SMALLER BRETHREN, the sandmen, the sand golem suffered from low Agility, which meant that the sheer power of its attacks wouldn't matter if they never hit me. Therefore, my plan of attack was to keep the golem disoriented while I chipped away at its stone body.

As a first attack, I sliced deep into the sand golem's body. Next, I spun behind it and plunged the black sword into its back. As my parting gift, I wrenched the blade free and slashed sideways across the beast's ribs.

Something was off. The sand golem barely seemed to notice my blows. I leapt out of range to get a better understanding of the situation. Any ordinary monster would have been slowed by my flurry of attacks, but the sand golem showed zero signs of damage.

"Don't tell me," I said, "the sand golem is like the sandmen, and the only part you can damage is the core…"

"Ah, you finally realized! And it only took you three strikes. Which, I have to say, is kind of third-rate, hm?"

"Well, if you ask me, I worked it out pretty quick."

Now, I understood that the sand golem was nothing more than its core, around which it turned sand into stone to create its huge humanoid form. I had to find a way to get to the core within. But where was it? The sand and rock weren't exactly transparent, so I had no way to see it.

"I guess I'll cut the golem down to a more manageable size."

"A bit boring," said Greed, "but sure."

"Shut up."

I had another reason for my chip-away strategy; it was a good chance to get live, one-on-one battle experience. The last time I'd fought a crowned beast —the huge kobold warrior known as "The One Called Howl"—I'd felt the difference in our experience levels immediately and avoided direct combat. Essentially, I'd hidden behind Greed's First Level secret technique and the power of the black bow.

The Hart family estate had been on the line, so it was a battle I couldn't have lost. But the ordeal had left me worried and uncertain. How far could I get, fighting that way?

"Well, I suppose a lumbering oaf like this makes a fine training dummy," said Greed. "But don't get too cozy. This is still a crowned beast."

"Got it."

It seemed Greed understood my goals after all. He wasn't always some sarcastic bastard-sword; to some extent, he really did care about the person wielding him. He just had a foulmouthed way of showing it.

"I'm going to get in there and sharpen my close-quarters fighting skills."

"Show me what you've got, boy."

I gripped the hilt of the black sword tight and dove into striking range. The sand golem reacted immediately, swinging both arms up to attack. It was too slow. I evaded the blow with ease and lopped off the monster's right arm. I followed up with another slice, severing its left.
But as the sand golem's arms danced in the sky, I was struck with an ominous sensation. This was too easy. Was this golem really a crowned beast? The One Called Howl had hungered for battle. It had been all too happy to throw away its life, and the lives of the other kobolds, in an effort to extinguish my own.
This sand golem had clearly experienced battle to become what it was. So, why didn't it fight back?
It's as if it wants to lull me into a false sense of security, I thought.
Just then, Greed shouted at me through Telepathy. *"Fate, get distance! Now!"*
Instantly, the sand golem transformed. Its body exploded into countless rocks that flew in every direction.
I grit my teeth as a huge rock flew straight at me. I was stuck in midair, unable to evade. The boulder collided into me, and the shock was like nothing I'd ever felt. It sent me flying over the dunes. When I finally landed, I skipped across the ground like a ragdoll, showered in sand.
"So," I said, dragging myself to my feet, "its whole body is a weapon, huh?"
"I told you not to get cozy, didn't I?"
I spat blood into the sand and strained my eyes to see the golem, which was so far away that it looked about the size of a bean. It had sent me farther than I thought possible. If the black sword hadn't absorbed the brunt of the attack, I wouldn't be standing. That had been far too close for comfort.
However, it was also good practice. Now I knew the golem's ace in the hole.
"All right. So, we dodge the incoming rain of huge flying boulders and aim for the golem's core," I said.
"Make sure to put me to good use while you're at it, Fate."
The sand golem's core floated in the air, calling back the rocks its body had fired. It was trying to pull itself back together before I struck again. I transformed the black sword into the black bow to prepare for my next close-range strike.
I launched a volley of fire arrows at the monster, careful not to get caught in the sand the shots kicked up as I ran after them. The fire arrows soared toward the sand golem's core, but were knocked aside by giant stones the golem quickly threw up as barriers. It was a good defense, but it didn't matter. My strategy wasn't to have these arrows pierce the golem's heart, but to use the flying sand and flame to hide me from view. Concealing myself in the cover I'd just created, I lunged toward the sand golem's core.
I transformed Greed back into the black sword. The sand golem still hadn't fully re-formed. This was my chance to slash it in half. Just as I reached cutting range, though, the sand golem once again burst into pieces. Sharp rocks and sand exploded everywhere.

“Not this time,” I muttered.
I knew what was coming, and I knew what to look for. These rocks weren’t so fast that I couldn’t avoid them with my Agility stat.
“Don’t back down now, Fate. Keep moving forward!”
“Would you quit telling me what I already know?!”
I weaved between the huge flying stones, dodging some and cutting down others before they could crush me. As I reached the core, the sand golem readied itself to stop me again.
Sand whipped around my feet. It was the beginning of the sand golem’s Sandstorm spell, which would trap me in place while the monster crushed me to death with its boulders.
Greed reacted immediately. *“Fate! The black scythe!”*
“On it.”
The black sword warped into the black scythe, and with it, I sliced the whirling sandstorm in half with a single swing. The storm dissipated instantly, undone by the cursed blade’s power.
A few moments later, and I’d cut down the stones protecting the core. All that remained now was the core itself, laid bare. It didn’t matter if it tried to cast another sandstorm. My scythe would render the spell useless. The sand golem had nothing left but to accept its doom on the ebon blade of my scythe.
I swung the finishing blow at the sand golem’s red core…

“Huh?!”
Knowing it had nothing left, the golem burrowed deep into the sand, throwing itself into a mad retreat. In less than a second, its core was out of sight. I couldn’t believe it. I stood watching the sand fly, dumbfounded.
“Fate!” Greed shouted. “Stop it, before it gets away!”
“But…”
No—Greed was right. I had come too far to let this monster flee. I was *not* leaving the table without feasting on tonight’s main dish! Also, practically speaking, the amount of hate built up during this battle wouldn’t just quietly go away. There was a good chance that if I let the sand golem escape now, it would take its bloody revenge on whatever adventurers happened by next.
I had a responsibility to finish things here and now, even if it meant going a little too far.
I changed Greed into the black bow. “I’m going to use the Bloody Ptarmigan technique. Take ten percent of my stats.”
“Only ten percent? Don’t be stingy, Fate. You know that’s not enough. You don’t even know where the sand golem went. It might already be deep underground by now. If you want me to catch it at those depths, I’ll need twenty percent.”
The black sword was as Greedy as ever, but I had no time to haggle. Any longer, and the sand golem would flee out of range. “Fine. Do it.”
“I see you’re no longer afraid to give up some stats for the taste of victory. That’s the spirit! Now, excuse me while I eat!”
I felt the black bow slurp strength out through my arm. As it ate, it filled with enormous power, morphing into an overwhelming apocalyptic weapon. I aimed the bow toward the point where the sand golem’s core dove under the sand. I added a fireball for good measure, then released the large-scale Bloody Ptarmigan attack with a shout. “Run away from this!”
The attack threw me backward with the sheer destructive force of its fiery lightning arrows. They bored into the dunes, straight down to the furthest depths of bedrock, gouging unsparingly through the land.
When the blast died away, Bloody Ptarmigan had carved an enormous valley through the desert itself. At the deepest point of the valley smoldered rivers of fire. The blast had sent up waves of sand so thick that, until they settled, it was difficult to take a clean breath.
Had I killed the crowned beast? I didn’t need to wonder long. A familiar metallic voice gave me the information I was waiting for.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +538,000, Strength +474,500, Magic +311,500, Spirit +353,000, Agility +120,000. New skill added: Sandstorm (Spell).

Judging by those boosted stats, my attack on the sand golem had also caught numerous unsuspecting sandmen. Bonus.
But felling a crowned beast meant feeding on a high-quality soul, which brought with it a wave of maddening euphoria. Now, I'd see whether my training had paid off. I felt the soul feed into my heart, and as it spread, I endured the pleasure without staggering or falling to my knees.
"How's that, Greed? No rolling on the floor for me this time!"
"You managed to hold it back. I'm impressed. But you are drooling."
"Oh." I wiped the saliva from my mouth and checked my eyes in the reflection of the black sword's blade. Two black irises stared back at me.
This was a big step up for me. Not only had I satiated Gluttony's half-starved state, I'd successfully controlled its hunger. The fact that the hunger was growing worse every day was concerning, and truthfully, sometimes I wasn't sure whether I'd still be Fate when I made it to Galia. But if I could learn to control Gluttony little by little, perhaps there was hope for me yet.
Suddenly, I became aware of voices calling to me. It was the hunting party from earlier. But it wasn't all of them. It seemed the adventurers who could still fight had banded together and returned as support.
The leader looked past me, out at the vast expanse of desert I had annihilated. He was shocked. "Did you… Did you do this? But…how? And where's the sand golem…?"
The question left his lips just as the core of the sand golem fell from the sky into the sand between us with a glassy crunch. The core was busted, almost fractured, and it had shifted in color from red to blue.
"I guess it's right here," I said.
I thought back to Greed's words earlier. "We just blow this whole place sky-high, sandmen and desert alike. Boom!"
In the end, that was exactly what we'd done.
I tried to play it cool as I walked up to the giant core and tapped it lightly with my sword, just to be sure. Around me, the gathered adventurers stared, struck dumb, mouths agape in such disbelief that they forgot to breathe.

Chapter 12:
Corpse, the Adventurer

I LOOKED OUT at the hunting party, a little unsure of what I should do. Behind me, the rolling dunes had exploded into a sea of flame. The adventurers might well label me a monster for causing this destruction. Cold sweat formed underneath my skull mask.

Just as I was about to open my mouth to speak, the leader broke into a huge grin. “Incredible! I don’t think I’ve ever met an adventurer who could pull off something like that. How about you guys?”

The adventurers clustered behind him nodded in agreement. Their leader continued to praise me as he approached. “I have to admit, with that creepy skull mask, you’re peak suspicious. But it’s not very fair of us to judge a book by its cover, you know?”

“Yeah,” said one of the others. “Thanks for saving us back there.”

“What sort of weapon is your black sword?” asked another. “Can I see it?”

It suddenly seemed silly that I’d been so wary of these people. I guess I’d developed a bad habit of being constantly on guard. Thus far, every adventurer I’d met besides Lady Roxy had been no better than the selfish trash from my village. By comparison, this hunting party valued its members as friends, and they had even worried enough about me, a stranger, to return to support me in battle, even if it meant their deaths.

The leader thrust out his hand. “I’m Baldo,” he said. “I’m the leader of this party. What’s your name?”

My identity was hidden by the powers of my skull mask, and I aimed to keep it that way. “Call me Corpse. How’s the rest of your party? The injured ones?”

“Thanks to you, they’re all still alive. They’re heading back to the city already. A little rest with the medics, and they’ll be back on their feet in no time.”

“I see.”

I was glad to hear it. But now I had the sand golem core to deal with. I had no doubt it would be worth a pretty penny…if I could haul it to Lanchester. And I needed the money. Paying for Myne as well as myself was eating into my savings. Fortunately, now that Corpse the adventurer had been revealed to this party, it wasn’t worth trying to slip quietly back into hiding.

I slid the black sword back into its scabbard and tried to lift the core. It was about as tall as me, and a pretty hefty package. Lifting it up dug my feet deep into the sand. Not just my feet, actually; I sank in all the way to my knees. Given my current stats, carrying the core wasn’t an issue, but its weight made shuffling through the sand a real pain.

Seeing my struggle, the leader motioned to his party, and together they helped me lift the core.

“We’ll give you a hand,” said the leader, “and we won’t even charge you for it. Right, guys?”
The party’s raucous cheers echoed across the desert. What was the saying? “Many hands made light work?” Well, many hands certainly made a light core, and I knew that together, we’d be able to carry it to the city.
“Thank you,” I said.
“No, we should be thanking you!” said the leader. “This is the least we can do.”
With the adventurers’ marching song bellowing through the night air, we paraded back to the city.
This kind of solidarity was nice, every once in a while.

***

Somehow, we all got to the inn before dawn. I knew that, if I’d been by myself, I’d still have been in the desert as the sun rose. I owed this small victory to teamwork.
As we made our way inside the inn, the staff dashed over to our small parade. When they saw the huge core we carried, they broke into a flurry, calling for the manager. After a short period of chaos, he arrived.
The manager bowed politely before leading us to the inn’s trading post. “To think that somebody finally defeated the sand golem. My, oh my, today truly is a splendid day!”
According to the manager, this particular crowned beast had been the kingpin of the monsters causing widespread desertification. For generations now, the holy knights in charge of Lanchester had looked for ways to bring the golem down, but whenever they had stood on the brink of victory, the sand golem had escaped into the depths of the desert sands. This pattern had repeated, over and over, for hundreds of years.
When I thought about it, the sand golem had definitely seemed well-versed in the ancient art of running away. It had vanished from sight the moment defeat was imminent. Apparently, it had polished that skill over hundreds of years of battle.
Without Greed’s First Level technique, I’d probably have ended up following the holy knight tradition of cursing the sky and stamping my feet in frustration at the golem’s crafty escape.
The trading post reverberated with noise from the crowds that had gathered. I couldn’t avoid them, so it was impossible to keep Corpse out of the spotlight. Luckily, having just defeated the bane of the territory’s existence, most who had gathered accepted me with open arms, despite my mysterious skull mask. Sure, a few people glared at me suspiciously from the edges of the crowd, but there was nothing I could do about them.
In the end, however, the trading post apologetically requested that I return the following day.

“I’m so terribly sorry,” the cashier said. “We’ll need time to prepare your reward money. We never imagined, in a million years, that someone other than a holy knight would finally defeat the sand golem. We’ll need a little time to appraise the core’s value and clear your payment with upper management. Please, put your feet up and relax today.”
“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be back later.”
I gave my thanks to the hunting party who helped me carry the core back, and in return they invited me out for a celebratory drink at the inn’s tavern.
“How about it? Nothing finer than a drink after a hard-fought battle! And besides, we wanna hear all the nitty-gritty details about how you defeated that sand golem!”
It was a tempting proposition, but I didn’t actually want to talk about my battle with the crowned beast. I’d only give away the fact I was an amateur relying on the support of my absurdly powerful black sword. This group of adventurers was clearly far more battle-hardened than I was, and I didn’t want to disappoint them. I politely turned down their offer.
I was glad when Baldo wasn’t put off by my declination. “It’s a shame we can’t buy you a drink as thanks, but we’ll be staying here a while to hunt sandmen. If you ever need anything, you call us, you hear? Rain or shine. All the best, Corpse!”
“All the best,” I said.
I headed to the inn’s giant staircase and up to the third floor. As I walked toward my room, I took a circuitous route to make sure I wasn’t being followed. I’d checked in as Fate when we first arrived, so perhaps I was a little overcautious, but I didn’t see the harm in being careful.
“Uh… What room number were we again?” I muttered.
With five hundred rooms on each floor, it was all too easy to forget where your room was among hundreds of others. They all looked the same!
“Turn left here, and it’s about fourteen rooms down,” said Greed, clearly tired of my anxiety.
“You’ve got a shockingly impressive memory, you know that?”
“I don’t know why you’re surprised. I’m an inorganic object. I’m made of different stuff than you humans. My memory’s great.”
Keeping my thoughts about the memories of things without brains to myself, I unlocked the door to my room and went inside.
Finally, I can rest…
In one of the two beds was Myne, still sound asleep. It seemed she still hadn’t noticed the cute little whiskers I’d given her. I took off my skull mask, placed Greed against the wall, and flopped into bed. I was utterly wiped out. I faded into sleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, exhaustion overwhelming me. I wouldn’t wake up even if someone were to draw all over my face…
Before I could really register that train of thought, I was fast asleep.

***

I woke to the rhythmic patter of falling water. I yawned as I sat up, and I glanced around while I stretched.

Myne was gone. Her bed was empty, but Sloth still leaned against the wall.

Then the sound of water stopped. After a brief silence, Myne reentered the room from the shower—dressed in only her underwear?!

“What the…?! P-put some clothes on!” I shouted, overcome with alarm.

“Why? Am I supposed to be embarrassed about being seen by a little boy like you?”

What a statement, from someone who looked younger than me!

Undressed as she was, I could see her tattoos more clearly. I hadn’t realized before, because of her clothes, but the white tattoos covered her chest and stomach. When she turned around, I saw that they decorated her back as well. They were pretty much everywhere except for her face.

Myne grinned as our eyes met. “That…*art*…you drew on my face—I had quite the time washing it off!”
A deep panic struck me, worse even than when I had faced the crowned beast. “I’m sorry! I… I did it on a whim! I couldn’t help myself!”
“Usually, I’d throw you out the window while you slept. But, as it stands, you’re more useful to me in good health. So, instead, I returned the favor.”
Still clad only in her underwear, Myne walked over with a pocket mirror in her hand. It was incredibly difficult to figure out where I should look.
“Behold, my newest masterpiece,” Myne declared. “No need to thank me!”
“What the hell?!”
The face that stared back at me from the mirror was that of a caveman. His thick eyebrows joined in the middle, and a scribbly black beard encircled his mouth, leading up to bushy sideburns. Across his forehead was scrawled a single word: GLUTTON.
This was beyond cruel! And perhaps it was just my imagination, but I was certain I could also hear Greed laughing at me, even though he was well out of reach, resting against the wall.
“All I did was draw a couple cute cat whiskers!” I cried. “You’ve turned me into an entirely different person!”
“I think it suits you. I really do.”
Despite her quietly pleased tone, Myne’s red eyes bored a hole into me. It was clear she would not accept anything other than total submission.
“All right! All right, I’m sorry. I brought this on myself. Now, could you please put on some clothes?!”
She might not have seen me as a man, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t one. Didn’t she know anything about young men in the prime of their youth?!
I had to get away from her, so I escaped straight to the shower. I tried to wash away the work of Myne’s revenge. The elaborate details. The word. The eyebrows. But it just…
Wouldn’t…
Wash…
Off…
…
This was surely the true form of Myne’s Wrath. For any slight done to her, I’d have to expect ten, maybe twenty times the retribution. Now that we would be traveling together, I needed to remember this well.

Chapter 13:
The Fate of Rude Holy Knights

IT TOOK SOME WORK, but in the end, I managed to wash away most of what Myne scrawled across my face. Unfortunately, when I looked closely in the mirror, I still made out the faded letters of "GLUTTON." Luckily, I could hide the word with my bangs. If that wasn't enough, I had my skull mask. I'd scrub the word away over the next few days. Now, I could focus on showering off the sand from yesterday's battle.

"Wow…"

The word escaped my lips with my surprise. There was liquid soap in the shower specifically for washing your hair! I'd been so focused on cleaning the ink off my face that I'd assumed all the inn had was traditional bar soap. When I was a servant of the Hart family, the servants' bathing quarters had only stocked bar soap, too. Liquid soap made with aromatic flower extract was a high-quality product. You couldn't buy this stuff just anywhere. Yet it was a standard feature of the rooms here?

I thought back to the subtle fragrance I'd noticed on Myne earlier. She must have washed her hair with this very liquid soap. I lifted the bottle and noticed a sticker on the side.

This soap will be considered purchased upon use. One gold coin will be charged to your bill.

So, it wasn't free after all. I should've expected a secret expense from fancy soap like this.

Then I realized. "Damn it…"

Myne had already used the soap. The moment she had, I'd bought it for her. If I pressed her about the expense, she'd likely say she needed it to wash away the whiskers I'd drawn on her face. If I could go back in time, I would have leapt back and snatched that pen out of my own hand. Alas. It was my fault, and Myne had taken her revenge on both my face and my wallet.

All the same, I intended to pay for the soap with my earnings from slaying the sand golem. I was expecting big money—the kind of reward that'd cover a bottle of high-quality liquid soap without issue.

I was really looking forward to that payday. I imagined all the things I could do with it. First, I'd buy a loaf of freshly baked bread. Then a bowl of stew, thick with meat. Just thinking about sitting in front of a steaming serving of stewed beef made me drool.

I put a little of the liquid soap in my hand, which made me wonder how many silver coins this dollop was worth. When I had been a lowly gatekeeper, it had taken me several years to earn two measly silver coins. For people who didn't come from money, like me, this soap was an incredible extravagance. But I could imagine Greed's voice if he were here: *Quit whining and wash your damn hair already*.

“Are you still in there? Hurry up. I want to go out.”
It was the voice of Little Miss Wrathful, and she was getting impatient. I had no idea what punishment she might dish out if I took too long in the shower, so I had to hurry. I put the soap in my hair, and…it was amazing. This soap was otherworldly.
Definitely worth a few silver coins, I decided.

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I left the shower feeling refreshed and found Myne splayed on her bed, dressed and ready to head out.
“What took you so long?” she muttered. “I’m tired of waiting.”
She didn’t do anything other than glare at me, but her crimson gaze was overwhelmingly intimidating.
“Hey now,” I said, “cheer up. I’ll give you this.” I plopped the bottle of liquid soap onto Myne’s belly.
“A fine gift from a clever young man,” she said. “Consider yourself forgiven.”
“Glad to have pleased you,” I said. “Okay, let’s get going.”
I strapped Greed to my side, took my bag in hand, and headed to the door, Myne close behind me.
“Oh, I almost forgot,” I said, taking the skull mask from my bag and setting it on my face. “In these parts I’m known as Corpse, the adventurer.”
Myne looked me over with my mask equipped and grinned. “Gosh! How *manly*.”
“Huh? What do you mean, ‘manly’?! I’m only wearing the mask to hide my identity…”
“Uh huh. Okay, let’s keep moving, Fate.”
“Wait! Explain yourself! And make sure to call me Corpse when I’ve got my mask on, okay?!”
Myne ignored my protests and walked on down the hall. Greed burst into laughter. I still wanted to know what she meant, calling me manly with my mask on!
“Aren’t you lucky?” Greed asked, still chuckling. “Someone likes your outfit.”
“Shut up, you.”
However I tried to look at it, Myne’s comment didn’t seem like a compliment. I was starting to doubt that we’d be good traveling partners after all. As I stood there worrying about our shared near future, however, Myne called out from the first floor.
“Hey, Corks! Hurry up!”
“It’s not Corks!” I cried. “It’s Corpse!”
She was teasing me! On top of that, she tried to leave the inn while I settled the bill, so I had to run and stop her. I told her we still had business to settle before leaving.

“What business?”
“Last night, I went to the desert east of here and defeated the sand golem. Do you mind waiting while I pick up the reward money?”
“The sand golem?! You mean that crowned beast grinding this place into a desert, don’t you?” Myne sighed. “I was planning to kill it myself on the way to our next destination, and now you say you beat me to it.”
So, that’s where she was trying so hard to run off to. Still, the sand golem was nocturnal. I wondered how she intended to find it during the day. I tried asking, but Myne was so mired in disappointment that she didn’t want to answer.
I sighed. “I’m going to head to the trading post, okay?”
“Fine… I’ll go too,” Myne said.
Her black axe resting across her shoulders, Myne followed slowly behind me, her whole body slouched with depression. She really was heartbroken that I’d gotten to the sand golem before her. Perhaps her Wrath was like my Gluttony, and she grew stronger by slaying monsters. If that was how Skills of Mortal Sin all worked, then losing a crowned beast had to be a real shock.
I hoped Myne would understand that I’d had to defeat the sand golem to get stronger myself. At some point down the line, she and I would have to fight together, and I’d need more power to prepare for that day. As it was, she outclassed me by leagues.
When we arrived at the trading post, it looked as if everyone had been anticipating our arrival.
“We’ve been waiting for you, Mr. Corpse! We prepared your reward money for defeating the sand golem.”
The gold coins on the counter took my breath away. Really? Is it really okay for me to take this much money?!
I was suddenly glad to be wearing my skull mask. I didn’t want anybody to see my stupefied expression as I took in the hundred gold coins placed before me. It was so much money that I wasn’t even sure what it could be spent on. Well, until I did know, I’d just have to keep it safe. I swept the coins into the very bottom of my bag, glancing around nervously as I did so. Myne watched greedily—suspiciously greedily, in fact.
“Myne,” I said, “was *this* what you were really after? The reward money for the crowned beast?”
“Yes. One of my goals on this journey is to make money. My village is poor. I use the rewards I get from killing crowned beasts to support it.”
“Ah, I see… Well, do you want half?”
Myne’s reply was loud, forceful, and assertive: “Yes!”
She didn’t need to be so loud about it. Fifty gold was more than enough for me! Myne took her share of the gold and placed it into her own bag, taking great care with each coin. As she did, her expression softened when she glanced over at me.

Hm. So, Myne becomes gentler when you give her money, I thought. I filed the information away in my mind as a new page in the How to Handle Wrath: An Explanatory Guide to Myne instruction manual.
“Well,” I said. “We’ve got our money, shall we depart?”
“Yes.”
We beamed the confident smiles of those blessed with fat wallets and made our way toward the exit.
At the front door, we found our path blocked by a well-armed group of warriors. In the center of the bristling group was a man fully decked out in heavy, golden armor, punctuated by a bright-red cape. To be honest, his outfit struck me as gaudy and tasteless. Behind him stood something like fifty battle-hardened adventurers. With such garish golden garb, I had a pretty good idea of who and what this overconfident guy was.
I used Identify to be sure.

Rudolph Lanchester, Lv 120
Vitality: 1,454,000
Strength: 1,698,000
Magic: 1,576,000
Spirit: 1,327,000
Agility: 1,495,000
Skills: Holy Sword Technique, Strength Boost (High), Magic Boost (High), Identify

The guy was seriously impressive. All his stats surpassed one million. His appearance had fooled me, but Rudolph was the real deal—a genuine holy knight.
However, Rudolph had the Identify skill, like I did, which was bad news. I could use Conceal to hide my skills, but I saw trouble ahead if he used Identify on me. Namely, he’d see that my stats surpassed his own.
I was at a loss. But before I had a chance to form a strategy, Rudolph stepped forward and stared down at me.
“You’re the adventurer who defeated the sand golem, then?” he sneered.
“Yes, sir.”
Rudolph looked me up and down and licked his lips. It was revolting, like his eyes were licking me. “I see. So, you must be quite powerful, then. Mr.… Dorks, was it?”
“Corpse, sir.”
“Ah, Corpse. Yes. Well, congratulations, Corpse. Starting today, you have the honor of joining the ranks of my servants. I suppose I’ll mention now that you’ve no right to refuse.”
Rudolph explained that he was bestowing this honor upon me due to my unprecedented defeat of the sand golem, something generations of holy knights had failed to accomplish. As a reward for my valor, he would forcefully induct me into the ranks of his servants.

From the smug flow of the conversation, I gathered that Rudolph had already judged me without using the Identify skill. He'd immediately assumed that, because I wasn't a holy knight, I couldn't possibly be his equal. For once, I was glad for his kind's legendary arrogance.
Despite Rudolph's rude assumption, part of me was relieved. If he'd spent even a moment looking at my stats, he'd have taken an entirely different attitude. The problem, however, was how I should respond.
"My humble apologies, sir," I said. "But I have business in another location."
"Absolute nonsense. If I, a holy knight, make a decision, your job is to obey it. Enough chitchat. Expose your neck so we can give you your citizen's tattoo."
Holy knights had significant power in Seifort, but clearly, their status was even more wildly disproportionate here in Lanchester. The whole territory belonged to them, and it was their little playground. This placed me in a predicament. I didn't like pulling weapons on people, but my best bet might well be to respond to Rudolph's demands with Greed. The holy knight didn't have the bearing of a man who'd listen to reason, and I could see in his eyes that I'd been appraised as little more than a new toy to play with. If I became his servant, I'd be just another of his pets, like the adventurers who stood behind him.
Rudolph approached me, getting closer and closer.
"Come now, join me." If he hadn't been so smug, he might even have sounded convincing. "You'll live the easy life, so long as you do as you're told."
As much as I didn't want to draw my sword in a city, it seemed I had no choice but to unleash Greed.
Or so I thought. In the next instant, Myne stepped between me and Rudolph.
"Corpse already has business with me," she said. "Step off."
As the command left her mouth, the atmosphere electrified. My gut told me that we were moments from chaos—if Rudolph didn't step aside, earthshattering violence would break out.
However, he didn't seem to have the same instinct I did. He was an arrogant man, used to having it done his way, all the time, every time.
Rudolph sneered at Myne as he looked down at her. "Snot-nosed little girls like you should know better. Run home to play nice with your mommy. If you *ever*—"
It was over in a flash. Whatever Rudolph had planned to say turned to a yelp when Myne struck. She hefted her black axe, and with a single stroke of the flat of the blade, she launched Rudolph up and away. He barely had a chance to cry out before he flew into the air.
This was a holy knight whose stats stood in the millions, but Myne sent him sailing through the roof of the inn, out over the giant walls of the very city he governed. He disappeared somewhere into the far distance. Could he

even survive such a fall? Well, with impressive stats like his, he wouldn't die so easily…probably.
Myne looked back at me, her face the very picture of impish relaxation. "I guess that holy knight flew home. Let's head off, shall we?"
"Uh, yeah! Let's do that."
There was nothing I could do but chuckle, really. Rudolph's men ran after him, crying and screaming as they fled. Nearby onlookers could not believe their eyes, and multiple witnesses had collapsed in shock. Looking at the panicked crowd, you'd think a circle of hell had erupted into the courtyard.
As for me, I wrote a new section in the instruction manual *How to Handle Wrath: An Explanatory Guide to Myne*. The chapter was titled "Why You Should Never Call Myne a Child," and the lesson inside was a matter of life and death.

Chapter 14:
Gluttony and Wrath

A FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since we'd left the holy knights' walled city, Lanchester, when I realized I hadn't said a word to Baldo or his adventurers before leaving. Then again, monster hunting was their trade, so I had a feeling we'd meet again. If we did, I figured our reunion would be a good enough excuse for a drink or two.

Our wagon rumbled on under the canvas of a clear blue sky. Thanks to the money I'd earned slaying the sand golem, we didn't need to hitch a ride as bodyguards this time. Instead, I spent fifteen gold coins to hire a private cart. Perhaps that was a little on the indulgent side, but at the same time, this was a once-in-a-lifetime journey—one I might never return from. Surely a bit of indulgence was worth the expense!

Naturally, sullen and sulky Little Miss Wrathful sitting next to me didn't contribute a single coin. Apparently, she hoarded whatever money she could to send to her home village. Still, it was kind of nice to have a traveling partner.

"How far to the next city?" I asked our driver.

"Hm… I'd say about three days."

Three days… I glanced at the food supply in the back of the cart. We were running low. Wait. Did I eat all of it? I thought. No, no, that can't be right. I've been so careful to ration our supplies.

I also clearly remembered checking how far Lanchester was from our next destination. That was why I'd bought so much food.

The real reason we were down to our last slivers of jerky should have been obvious: Myne. Her appetite was profound. Did she secretly have Gluttony too? Actually, I'd slipped up earlier and told her it was a wonder she never grew any bigger, what with all the food she consumed. I would not quickly forget the punch in the face she gave me in return.

More importantly, I was starving. My stomach rumbled hungrily. The driver glanced back at me. "There's a bustling little village called Sui, and it's not too far from here," he said. "It'll take us slightly off course, but you'll be able to top up your food stock. Be good to give our horses a rest too."

This was better than I could have asked for. I agreed immediately, and we changed course to Sui.

"What do you think, Myne? You think it's a good idea?"

Myne continued to stare vacantly up at the sky. "No idea what you're talking about," she said, "but yes."

"Thanks, that really cleared things up…?"

Myne was always completely oblivious to anything she wasn't interested in. She let out a big yawn, reached back into the cart, grabbed the last of our jerky, and started chewing on it.

“Wait, why are you eating the last of our food now?!”
“Because I’m hungry. Didn’t you just say we’re going to buy more food?”
“Yeah, but…”
But I was hungry too. I wanted to tell her that, but I was pretty sure it would be a fruitless endeavor, so I gave up.
“Here, this is for you.”
I turned back to Myne, who stuffed a piece of jerky into my mouth. It was a delicious treat for my empty stomach.
“You’re hungry too, right, Fate?”
“Yeah…” I mumbled around the jerky.
She didn’t show a single shred of interest in the things she didn’t care about, but she’d clearly heard the rumblings of my stomach. I wasn’t about to thank her, though! I was the one who’d bought the food in the first place.
Still, this gesture was out of character for her. After feeding me, Myne munched through the last of her own jerky, then rested her head on my knees, using them as a pillow.
“There’s space in the back if you want to sleep, you know,” I said.
“I don’t like it back there. It’s hard. I can’t get to sleep. This pillow’s a *little* more bearable.”
“Well, please accept my humble apologies that this pillow isn’t up to your high expectations.”
“I’d like the pillow better if it didn’t talk so much. Wake me when we get there…”
And in the next instant, Myne conked out. She slept so soundly. To see her curled up, and to hear her gentle, quiet breaths…if I didn’t know better, I’d have said she looked like a sleeping child. If I dared say as much, however, I’d find myself launched into the air like Rudolph had been a few days ago. I gently patted Myne’s head, then leaned back and touched Greed’s hilt.
“Hey, Greed,” I said. “What do you think Myne’s goals are?”
“Beats me.”
“You know, don’t you?” I asked. “You totally know. You’re just playing dumb.”
“If you keep traveling with her, you’ll see for yourself soon enough. You’ll get a glimpse of them, anyway. But I wouldn’t get too involved in her deal if I were you.”
“A glimpse…?”
I wondered whether her mysterious Galian foe had something to do with her Skill of Mortal Sin. Or were her plans entirely different? I had no way of knowing. I wanted to talk it over with Greed, but the black sword was more interested in other things.
“Hey, Fate,” he said, a hint of cheekiness in his dark voice. “Now’s your chance. You can get your revenge. You know, for last time.”
“What are you babbling about?”
“While Myne is fast asleep, write ‘wrath’ on her forehead. It’ll be hilarious, I promise.”

“I think you mean it’ll be hilarious for *you*. What about me?”
“Will you do it? Will you take up my challenge?”
“Of course I won’t! Do you think I have a death wish?!”
Rudolph’s flying departure played again in my memory, but in my mind’s eye, the victim was me instead of Rudolph. *“I’ll see you all in Sui when you get there!”* I cried as I flew through the air… No, reality would play out far differently!
The real pain, though, was that whenever I wanted to talk seriously with Greed, he found something ridiculous to joke about instead.
After another hour or so, our cart arrived at the village of Sui.
“This… Wow.” I muttered before I could even fully verbalize my thoughts. Fields of wheat stretched out before us. Water mills were everywhere, their wheels powering millstones that echoed with the sound of grinding barley. This village had incredibly advanced farming techniques. And the wonderful scent of bread! The aroma of freshly baked goods drifted over everything, a delicious fragrance that had me practically drooling.
Sui seemed to grow produce other than barley, too. I saw fields of vegetable varieties I’d never seen before, and I heard cows and pigs in the distance. It was a village far more prosperous than the one I’d once called home.
“I’ve never seen a village so vibrant and flourishing,” I said.
“That’s Sui for you,” said the driver. “It’s blessed with an abundance of spring water. The water’s especially good for plants too. It helps anything grow, really. When you get to the heart of the village, you can see the lake for yourself. Can’t miss it.”
“So, different types of water have different effects? How strange.”
“They say it started about fifty years ago. Spring water bubbled up from under the ground, and especially lush greenery began to grow around that small spring. Passing travelers stumbled into the area, and eventually, others gathered here too. Soon enough, the place grew into the village that stands before you.”
Was it possible for a spring to emerge from nowhere? I couldn’t help but think it was an odd story. The lands around Sui were dry and barren, a stark contrast to these flourishing fields. This village was literally an oasis in the middle of a desert.
Our driver leaned in and said something strange. “Look, I know you’re in a rush, so it’s probably nothing to worry about, but I feel like I should say something all the same. Whatever you do, don’t make your stay in Sui a long one.”
“But…why not? It’s so peaceful here.”
The driver frowned at me, uncertainty written across his face. I got the sense that he didn’t really know the reason he was warning me either.
“Well, it’s just that…people who stay here too long, they end up never wanting to leave.”
I wanted to tell him to lay off with the jokes, but there was such a weight to the driver’s voice that all I could do was chuckle uneasily.

We decided to stay the night and head out at first light the following day. I unloaded the still sleeping Myne and her black axe from the cart, and the driver took the horses to the inn to rest.
Now I had to wake Myne up, and I had to consider the *how* part of that very carefully. I knew that if she didn't like the way I woke her, she'd get mad, and I'd suffer. At the same time, she'd specifically asked me to wake her, so I had to think of some way that was both gentle *and* definitive.
"All right," I muttered. "I've got an idea. Let's give it a shot."
I gently squeezed her little nose shut with my fingers, and I waited. A few moments later, Myne's eyebrows twitched, and her body tensed.
So far, so good.
A few more moments of this, and Myne's face started to redden. The lack of oxygen was getting to her. All I had to do was make sure I got the timing right.
Wait for it, wait for it… Now!
Just as Myne opened her eyes, I let go of her nose. "Hey, Myne. We've arrived."
"Oh…" Myne blinked sleepily. It seemed as if she hadn't noticed a thing. That was good to know. It meant I could do it again.
"Oh, and don't forget your axe," I said, holding out her weapon. "The old man took the horses to the inn so they could rest a bit. We should probably go stock up on supplies while we're here."
"Okay."
Upon taking up the black axe in one hand, however, Myne snatched my nose with the other. Her movement was faster than my reaction speed, even with my high Agility.
"I asked you to wake me up," she said, "so I'll forgive you this one time. But if you *ever* do that again…"
"Ow, ow ow ow!"
She'd known all along. But that didn't mean I would give up. There was just something about Myne's adorable, peaceful sleeping face that invited pranks. I didn't know why, exactly—only that the urge was near impossible to resist. Perhaps Gluttony was making me do it.
When I tried to explain this, Myne just furrowed her brow and squeezed my nose harder. "Did you hear me?" she asked.
"I did. I heard you! I won't do it again! Now please let me go!"
Myne finally released me, and I rubbed my nose. Oh, don't you worry, I thought. I won't do that one again. Next time, I'll figure out something new and completely different!
In any case, with Myne awake and on her feet, we went to buy supplies.
"I'm beat. Let's get our shopping done quick so we can head to the inn," I said.
"Great. I need some more sleep," said Myne.
"All you ever do is sleep!"

Myne trailed after me drowsily as we headed into the heart of the village. There weren't a lot of stalls or shops, but every shelf was jam-packed with produce. In mild disbelief, I asked a lady selling vegetables about it.
"This is just how it is, here in Sui," she said. "The farming is incredible. Produce, livestock—they all grow so quickly. But, you know, it goes bad real quick if you take it away from the village, so we can't really ship to other towns or cities."
"But it's okay to eat?"
"Of course! We eat this stuff every day! Hm…but you're travelers, so you're probably looking for food to pack, right?"
"Yes."
"In that case, how about some salted jerky? Perfect for a journey. All the passing travelers buy it."
We followed the lady's directions to the butcher, where we loaded up on salted and spiced jerky. Of course, Myne didn't pony up a single copper.
"What a weird place, don't you think?" I asked as we walked through the village with our hefty sack of jerky. "They raise all this delicious produce and livestock, but they can't ship it out of here."
"Look over there, Fate."
"What? You mean, at those triplets?"
"Yeah. And over there."
"Wait…are those kids quadruplets?!"
It wasn't just them. There were tons of children in the village, many of them triplets and quadruplets. It was mind-boggling.
"Maybe Sui's a fertile village too?" I wondered.
Myne ignored my attempt at an explanation. "No. That's not it."
I placed a hand on the hilt of the black sword. *"Myne's right,"* Greed said. *"Something's creating these conditions."*
"What do you mean, 'something'? There's nothing here."
"Oh? I'm certain someone dropped an important hint earlier."
A hint? The only thing I could think of was the strange spring water the driver had mentioned. That mysterious spring was where everything had started. It was why this strange little village even existed.
We made our way to the lake at the center of the village. They'd said it started as a small spring. Now, the lake was so big that I thought the entire castle of Seifort could probably have been sunk in it. I watched as people of all ages played in the water. The lake seemed like a place to relax, unwind, take it easy. I reached a hand down and cupped some of the crystalline water in my hand.
"Fate, don't," Myne said. "Don't let it get inside you."
"Huh? I just wanted to check it…"
Myne took hold of my arm and placed her black axe on the ground. "I had my suspicions earlier, but this is really it."
"Sure seems like it," Greed muttered in agreement.

I had no idea what they were talking about, so I pressed Myne for a straight answer.
“It’s a city eater,” she said.
“A monster,” Greed added. “A gigantic, monolithic monster. Its appetite matches its grotesque size. Fortunately, this beast only eats once every few hundred years. Now, listen carefully, because this next tidbit is important. The city eater has a unique way of gathering enough food to sate its appetite. It takes a long, long time.”
“No… Are you saying…?”
Greed didn’t need to continue. I could put the rest together myself. The heart of the truth was the name of the monster: the “city eater.” Sui’s unusual prosperity was the work of this monster. And this water…this peaceful lake…was bait, drawing people in like honey in a trap.
There was nothing monsters enjoyed more than eating humans.
The kids I’d seen earlier, the triplets and quadruplets, were a side effect of the city eater’s influence. They were born so plentifully to give the beast even more to feast upon.
I stared hard toward the bottom of the lake, but it was far too deep. I couldn’t see to the bottom. At this distance, my Identify skill was useless.
“The city eater waits down there?” I asked.
“It does,” said Myne. “One day, it will devour everyone who calls this place home.”
I wanted to speak, but I swallowed my words. I hated this monster with every fiber of my being, but that wasn’t what I had trouble articulating.
Myne seemed to understand. “If we fight the beast here,” she continued, “we cannot prevent Sui’s destruction. Nobody will believe us if we tell them about the city eater. The monster makes its home in the deepest parts of the earth. The villagers won’t flee if we tell them to, and anybody who doesn’t run will be pulled into the battle, whether they like it or not.”
“Even if we kill it,” I said, “the village is doomed.”
“Yes. The city eater itself is the heart of Sui. When it is gone, this place will return to the barren, lifeless desert it was before, just like the land surrounding it. If the villagers had to flee, could you promise them a life as good as the one they have now?”
“I…I couldn’t.”
“So, this is a monster we’d best leave alone.”
“But…”
The city eater had to be defeated, but not yet. In the end, Myne was right. For the city eater to prepare its meal, this village would have to grow much bigger. Even at its rapid speed, that would take a long, long time. Perhaps a hundred, even two hundred years. While the city eater waited, the villagers dwelling here could spend their lives in oblivious bliss. Their futures were not something passing strangers had the right to decide.
I knew all this. I understood Myne’s logic. Yet I was frustrated, helpless in the face of Sui’s doom. I gripped the hilt of the black sword in my fist.

As I did, Greed spoke. “You can always come back, Fate. You can find a way to solve this problem, then return to Sui.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” I said. “That’s what I’ll do.”

Whenever I felt weak like this, I saw *her* face in the back of my mind—the one worthy of the title holy knight. *If Lady Roxy were here, what would she do?*

If it were Lady Roxy in Sui, she’d think of something I couldn’t, and then she’d see her plan through.

“I can’t do anything as I am right now,” I said to Myne as I stared out at the lake. “But when I come back, the next time I stand here…”

“Not all battles are solved with strength alone,” she said. “You had to learn that one day, and I’m glad you did. Let’s head to the inn.”

In that moment, Myne’s face—usually so hard and expressionless—seemed to soften with just a hint of kindness.

The city eater was a monster best left alone, unlike any other I’d encountered. If I met another monster like this one, a monster it wasn’t right to hunt and kill, would I unsheathe my sword to face it?

Perhaps my answer would depend on how heavy my heart had by then become.

Chapter 15:
An Old Knight in His Twilight

AFTER STOCKING UP AT SUI, where the city eater slept, our cart headed back out on the road. As we traveled farther and farther from Seifort, towns and cities grew few and far between. The closer we got to Galia, the less habitable the land became.

The barren environment was indisputably a result of the monsters pouring across the Galian border. Since Lady Roxy's father had died to the Heavenly Calamity of Galia, leaving the border without holy knights to hold back the horde, the situation had only worsened. Having fought my share of monsters to get this far, I felt foreboding in my bones.

Monsters from Galia now menaced even faraway regions. If this incursion grew any greater, the effect on the kingdom would be grave indeed. Such thoughts troubled me as our cart approached a small village, only to be scattered when a loud noise echoed from the bottom of the cart and we rattled to a halt.

"Ah, curses," our driver said. "The left wheel's busted."

After checking the damage, he uneasily declared that he'd need three days to repair the wheel and get us back on the road. In other words, for the next three days, we'd be staying in the small village we'd happened upon.

I expected Myne to burst into anger at being stuck in the middle of nowhere when we could've been continuing toward Galia, but she just shrugged.

"It's only a matter of time. We'll be back on the road eventually," she said, then wandered down the road to check out the village on her own.

Always walking to the beat of her own drum, that girl.

While Myne did whatever it was she was up to, and the driver cursed at the broken cart, I decided to search for the village elder. If we wanted to stay here for the next three days, we'd need their permission.

"Tell you what, though," I said. "It sure is peaceful here."

"It wouldn't surprise me if they've got someone powerful to protect them," said Greed.

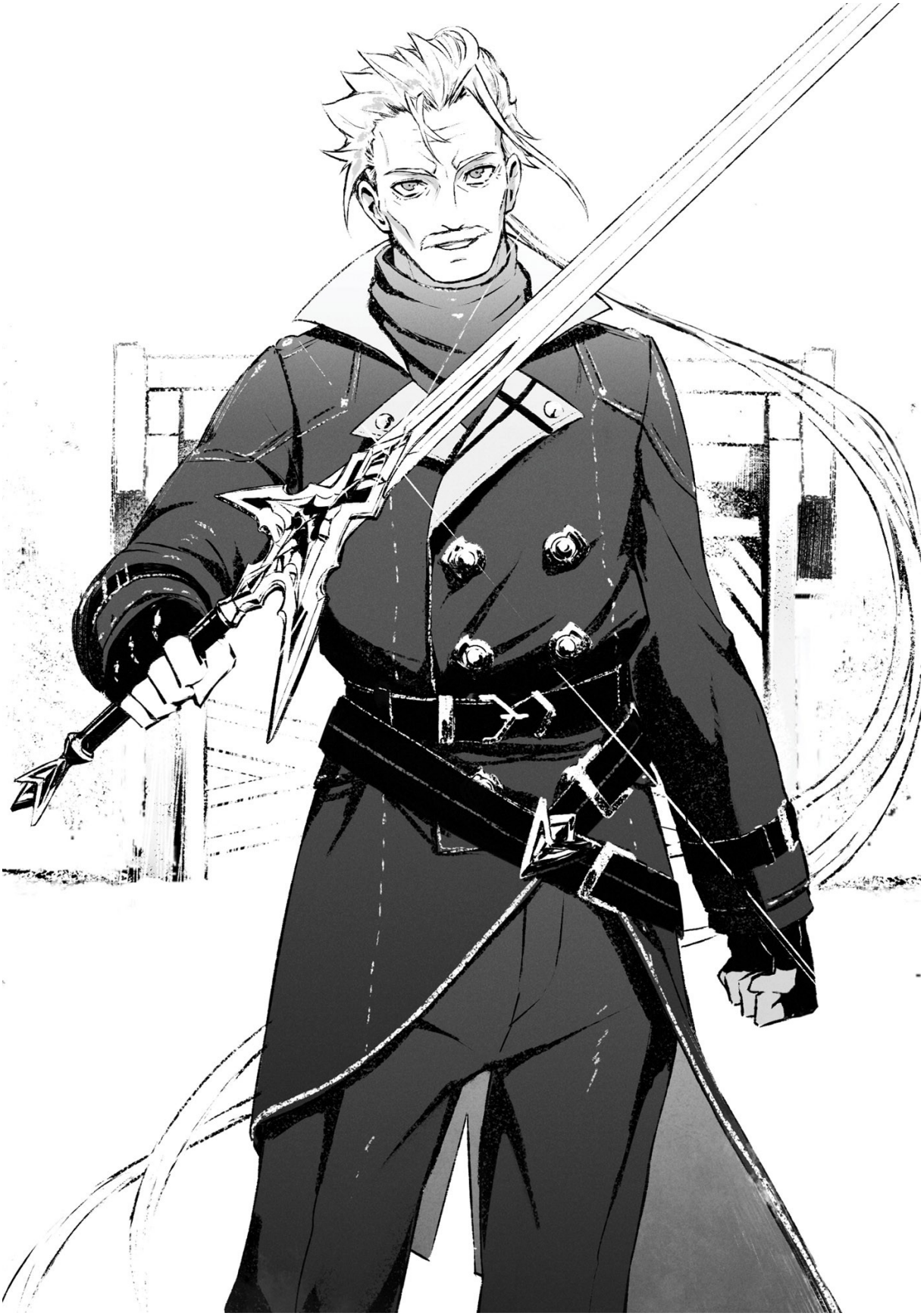
He was probably right. We were already halfway to Galia, but this little village felt nearly as peaceful as Seifort. We'd been fighting off monsters as we traveled, but here, I detected no hint of monstrous presence. For such a rough area, the villagers went about their business with a curious air of reassurance.

As I walked on, I found an old man sitting on the stump of what had once been a large tree. He'd tied his hair back into a ponytail.

Perfect timing. I'll ask him where the elder is.

As I approached the old man, he spoke first. "I thought I sensed a couple strong auras. Yours must be one of them. At least you don't seem hostile."

The old man smiled and put out a hand. “I’m Aaron Barbatos, the village elder in these parts,” he said. “Welcome to our humble home, young traveler.”
So, he was the guy in charge.
“I’m Fate Graphite,” I said. “I was wondering if it would be okay for us to stay here? Our cart’s broken down, and we’ll need a few days to repair it.”
“You can stay as long as you need,” said Aaron. “On one condition—a duel.”
He drew a shining golden sword from the grass by the stump. I knew the hue. That was a holy sword, which meant this Aaron Barbatos was a holy knight. He must have seen our arrival and prepared himself and his weapon while he waited for us to enter the village. He’d said I didn’t seem hostile… but if I didn’t meet his expectations, I didn’t doubt that he’d cut me to quivering chunks of human jelly, no questions asked.
“I must refuse,” I demurred. “I’m not strong enough to compete with a holy knight.”
Aaron laughed. “No need to play coy with me, young one. My Identify skill tells me you’re only Level 1, yet your stats suggest a different story.”
Not just in charge, nor just a holy knight—he had Identify. I hadn’t expected that, and it had cost me. He’d caught me off guard.
“So, what *are* you saying, then?” I began to unsheathe Greed.
Aaron raised his left hand to stop me. “I’m saying exactly what I said earlier. I don’t sense any hostility in you. I’m not asking you to fight to the death, either. All I want is a chance to see your true strength with my own eyes. So, how about it?”
The old man unsheathed his sword as he waited for my reply. He was eager to get started. There was nothing left for me to do but humor him. I drew Greed from his scabbard and settled into a fighting stance, my blade pointed at the old man.



“Hm. There’s a wildness to you, isn’t there?” Aaron said. “Looks like you learned swordsmanship from goblins and kobolds.”
“Is that a compliment?”
“It is not.”
However, my fighting style was not something I’d had a say in. I didn’t have a teacher. My sword techniques were my own. I didn’t need to know if my stance was correct or proper. I only cared that it killed monsters.
“You may well be capable of felling monsters, young man, but I suspect you’ll have trouble in a duel with another warrior,” Aaron said.
“Is that so? If you really do have Identify, then you must have seen my stats. You know what those numbers mean…” I replied.
“Care to put them to the test, then?”
In the next instant, Aaron’s blade was inches from my nose. This old man was quick!
“You certainly appear strong,” he said, “and all your stats surpass two million. Yet they count for nothing if you can’t put them to good use. It looks to me like your body still isn’t used to the power you’ve received.”
“So what?”
“How about this? While you’re here, let me teach you the way of the sword. Indulge an old man and his eccentricities. That’s my one condition for your stay. How about it?”
Indulge him? The way of the sword? I was hesitant. The old man might be hiding something sinister behind that kind smile. At the same time, his assessment was right on the money. Ever since my stats had surpassed two million, I’d felt unpleasantly uncoordinated, as though I were improperly connected to my body.
This might well be a perfect opportunity. If the old holy knight would really teach me swordsmanship, I needed his knowledge. The fighting style I’d developed from my wild goblin teachers, so to speak, could only take me so far.
“You’ve got yourself a deal. While we’re here, you’re my teacher.” I sheathed the black sword and bowed to Aaron.
“Excellent, Fate. To be honest, I’ve long dreaded withering away of old age in this quiet village,” he said. “So many years I’ve waited for the right young traveler to appear that I might teach them everything I know. And, as luck would have it, here you are!”
“Uh, just to be clear,” I said, suddenly a bit overwhelmed, “my party is, uh… only here for three days, okay?”
“In that case, we’d best get started immediately!”
With those words, I expected Aaron to unsheathe his sword once more. Instead, he came right at me with his bare fists. The attack caught me off guard, and though I attempted to stop his punch, the sheer weight of it sent me flying backward. The old man was in much better shape than his appearance let on!

“Ha!” he exclaimed. “You blocked my surprise attack, even at such close range! But how about this?!”
“How about wha—?!”
Before I had a chance to finish my sentence, Aaron flipped acrobatically over my head as he launched his next attack. *How can an old man be so agile?!*
In this way, Aaron beat hand-to-hand combat techniques into me until evening. If I hadn’t had the Health Regen skill, my body would have been a tapestry of bruises.
“Hand-to-hand combat teaches control of your stats and hones your body more directly than a weapon,” Aaron said. “But let’s call it a day, shall we? Let me show you my home.”
As I dreaded what kind of torture Aaron had in store for me next, I noticed Myne walking toward us. When Aaron saw her, a flash of surprise spread across his face.
“But that’s impossible…” he murmured to himself.
“Is something wrong?” I asked.
“No, it’s nothing. Are the two of you traveling together?”
“Yes. Her name’s Myne. She’s got a temper on her, so tread carefully. She’s a bit like a wild horse.”
“Sounds like quite the handful,” Aaron laughed.
I was serious! “Yeah, it’s not so funny when you’re the one traveling with her.”
Myne must have realized we were talking about her, because she sneezed as she walked toward us. As she approached, she glared directly at me.
Uh oh. What am I in for this time?

Chapter 16:
Secrets of the Blade of Light

AARON WAS A HOLY KNIGHT, so given my prior experiences, I assumed his home would be a grand mansion or similarly lavish residence. Instead, he brought Myne and I to a simple red-brick house.
Aaron laughed at my surprise. “Ah, perhaps you expected something a bit more extravagant?”
“To be honest, yes. Yes, I did.” I’d never met a holy knight without an estate.
“Honesty is a fine quality. I just hope my humble abode will satisfy you.”
Aaron looked at Myne, who turned away from us with a pout. “Did I say something wrong?”
“I wouldn’t worry about it,” I said. “She’s always like that.”
“I see.”
Aaron’s posture shifted, as if he were saddened. Despite the drop in mood, however, he went ahead and opened the door to his home, inviting us in.
This wasn’t the first time Myne had acted so guarded around other people. Actually, I’d never once seen her start a productive conversation with anyone we’d met on our travels. Perhaps the only reason she could talk to me so easily was because I also wielded a Skill of Mortal Sin. She struck me as the kind of adventurer who didn’t trust anything besides her own power. That loner attitude fit her fighting style like a custom-forged gauntlet.
The interior of Aaron’s house surprisingly empty.
Aaron laughed once more at the shock on my face. “The villagers built this house for me. Well, to tell the truth, in the beginning there was no village. I killed monsters in these parts to idle away my time. Before I knew it, people gathered around me—people who had lost their homes. They banded together and built this village. As it grew, I came to oversee it as the elder.”
Aaron called his villagers troublesome, but he did so with an easy smile and without a hint of malice. He said they were a pleasant distraction while he waited for time to whittle away the life he had left.
He poured us cups of fresh tea as he went on. “I keep telling these villagers that, at my age, I won’t be able to protect them forever. They just reply that they don’t have anywhere else to go! With me to the end, that’s what they say.”
“Are you saying the villagers are happy to die with you, Lord Aaron?”
“You don’t need to call me Lord Anything, Fate. Just Aaron is fine. As to your question, it certainly seems like it. That’s got me rather worried. The villagers must know that, without me here to look after them, the monsters will feast.”
Regardless, Aaron confessed he thought it hopeless to convince the villagers otherwise. He’d all but given up trying.

“Uh… You’re not saying that you want me to take over as protector of the village, are you?” I asked nervously.
Once again, Aaron bellowed with laughter. “I’d say no such thing! It wouldn’t be right to spring that burden on a passing traveler.”
“In that case, why *are* you doing all this for me?”
I couldn’t shake the feeling that Aaron was driven by some ulterior motive, strange as it might be. Who offered to train a person they’d never met? A person they didn’t even know, who’d just walked into town at random? Aaron’s affectionate description of the village made me even more certain that he was hiding some odd reason for his behavior.
Earnestness brightened Aaron’s eyes. “It’s my damn ego,” he said. “By learning my skills, you’ll become living proof of my existence. I’m but an old man nearing the end of his road. Will you grant me that selfish wish, Fate?”
“Proof of your existence…?”
I looked around the sparsely furnished room. Next to Aaron’s bed, I spotted a small picture resting on a shelf. It was a portrait of a family. The young man seemed to be a younger Aaron. The beautiful woman with black hair beside him was likely his wife. Between them was a black-haired boy with a strong-willed look on his face, clutching a replica of a holy sword.
“What’s that picture?” I asked.
“My family—a long time ago, when I was a knight in the Kingdom of Seifort. I was so busy with my duties that I rarely returned home. Then, after I was assigned to the Galian region, monsters overran our estate. My family was killed. Now, I keep their picture by my bedside, and I spend my days trying to repent for abandoning them. It’s foolish, isn’t it?”
“No, it’s not,” I said. “I’m…sorry for bringing it up.”
Something about the boy in that picture almost resembled me. The will in his eyes, or maybe the dark hair. Did Aaron see me as a chance to recover his son? Perhaps he thought that, if he shared with me what he’d wanted to share with that lost child, he could atone for what he thought of as his past sins. Or maybe I was overthinking it.
Yet I couldn’t dismiss the notion as I looked at Aaron, and the profound sadness that had made a silent home in his features.

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The following day, I glanced over at Myne. She was lounging beneath the shade of a tree, yawning.
Lucky. Far luckier than me.
That jealous thought lost me my concentration for a deadly moment. Instead of catching Myne’s yawn, I caught three heavy strikes to the gut.
“You have time to check on your friends during battle, I see,” said Aaron. “Am I going too easy on you?”
We only had two days left of training, so Aaron had started our second day at sun-up, and at full speed.

“Wait, wait, wait.” I held my hands up. “Can we take things a touch slower? This pace is unforgiving. You might put your back out, old man!”
“Ah, not so unforgiving you can’t backtalk, eh?”
I worried that my comeback set a fire in Aaron. We were practicing stat control through bare-handed sparring, but any major blow could still result in a painful injury. Even so, Aaron believed that the most effective training resembled true combat. In that sense, the severity of the training was unavoidable; after all, we were squeezing into three days what one would normally practice for three years.
That was why Aaron wasn’t satisfied with lectures alone. Rather, he wanted me to feel the lessons through my body, and he trained my reflexes and instincts as well as my mind. It was effective. I was learning not just movement, but awareness. The intensity of the training meant I didn’t have time to think, only to react. My body was already starting to understand how to manage any situation with appropriate stat control.
We continued our sparring session straight through to lunch without rest.
“You’re starting to stand more like a warrior now,” said Aaron. “As I thought, actions speak louder than words! I’m grateful you’re so resilient.”
“If I wasn’t, I’d be dead now,” I said.
I whispered another silent thanks to my Health Regen as we trained, and in response, felt a familiar pulse run through my body.
Not now! I pleaded with myself.
I’d been working on controlling Gluttony’s starvation state. That training was also showing results, but if my mind ever wandered, hunger instantly showed in my face. I knew from the familiar itch that my right eye was once again turning crimson. I thought about squeezing it shut and making something up—a bruise or dirt—but somehow, I knew I’d never fool Aaron. There was no way I could defend myself against his attacks with only one eye, either. I had no choice but to push on.
“Hm… How strange,” Aaron muttered. “Your eye has changed color. It’s almost the same shade as Myne’s…”
“Uh… My eyes change color when I get excited,” I said, stumbling for an excuse.
“So, does that mean that Myne is…always excited?”
Myne, still resting under the tree, stared at me as her hand reached slowly toward the hilt of her black axe. Her eyes spoke for her, drilling into my very being: *“You want me to show you excitement?”*
All right, yeah, I had to be more careful about flippantly making stuff up.
Aaron looked a little awkward, stuck on the outskirts of my silent conversation with Myne, so I turned my attention back to him.
“Ready for another round?” I asked.
“That’s the spirit,” he said. “Get ready!”
Suddenly, I found I could track Aaron’s attacks as if he were moving just a touch more sluggishly. My half-starved state was somehow more intense

than I was used to. Was training my body having a synergistic effect on my skills?
Aaron noticed a change in me too, and he paused for a brief moment. "What?!" he exclaimed. "Your movements…they've changed. They're sharper. Quicker."
"I owe it all to my teacher," I said. "Are you ready? Because it's my turn now!"
Over the last day and a half, Aaron had drilled into me the importance of footwork in one-on-one combat. Lower-body movements could help me read my opponent. A deep step forward signaled a serious attack, while a shallow approach indicated a feint or defense. I could use the same signals to gauge and control my opponents' responses. It was common to watch an opponent's hands when they attacked, but Aaron stressed that it was more helpful to read their footwork first, because their feet dictated where their hands would go.
Now that Aaron had taught me all this, it was my turn to give back. I slipped past his punch and took a deep step into close range. *Now!*
I launched my right fist, stopping just shy of his nose.
"You're learning," Aaron said.
I owed my newfound ability to Gluttony's half-starved state. Without it, these movements would still have been impossible for me. Now that I was capable of maneuvering like this while half-starved, my abilities would only sharpen further when I was fully starved. Perhaps then, I'd be capable of pulling off a truly otherworldly feat.
"I never would have imagined that something so simple as a changed eye color would result in such dexterity. You're a different person with that red eye, Fate. So, this must be your true power! But I sense that it places a heavy weight on your soul… You're training to control that, too, aren't you?"
"Something like that," I said, chuckling to make it seem like less than what it was. However, I was afraid the chuckle just made me sound nervous.
Now, I was finally curious about Aaron's stats. He'd used Identify to view mine, and while I'd felt strange about prying earlier, it was only fair that I got to do the same. I activated Identify.

Aaron Barbatos, Lv 180
Vitality: 3,244,000
Strength: 3,856,000
Magic: 3,948,000
Spirit: 3,874,000
Agility: 4,098,000
Skills:

He was…incredibly strong. All his stats were over three million. In other words, he was even stronger than I was. Additionally, it seemed he was using Conceal to hide his skills. But even without knowing his skills, his

stats alone told me he was a high-ranking holy knight. As I took this in, a slightly annoyed look crossed Aaron's face.
"I don't much like people using Identify right in front of me," he said. "You see, it requires a slight eye movement to work. People who know what to look for can always tell when they're Identified."
"Oh, I had no idea…"
"It's only natural, really. When I used it on you earlier, you didn't seem to notice at all."
So, top-level adventurers could spot the use of Identify. I'd have to spend a little time in front of a mirror when I had the chance. I was curious as to exactly how my eyes moved.
"Did you know there's a way to momentarily disrupt the Identify skill?" Aaron asked.
"If there is, I'd like to know how," I replied.
For someone like me, who had such wildly different stats from everyone else—stats impossible for almost anybody—that would be a godsend. It might also allow me to shield my stats from enemies during battle.
"Let me show you. Use Identify on me again."
As instructed, I activated Identify. This time, my eyes suddenly met a burst of stars. *What the hell was that?*
"When you used Identify, I released some magical energy at the exact same time. If you get the timing right, you can briefly disorient a person, and they won't be able to use Identify while they're confused. Not many people can do this anymore, but it's a handy technique to tuck in your belt. Remember this, and work on it."
"Thank you, Aaron."
"Well, shall we break for lunch?"
"Sure."
I was learning so much. Greed had taught me how to wield the black sword in battle, but he hadn't taught me a single thing about basic combat. With Aaron's tutelage, I was finally coming to understand why basic training was so critical.
The basic movements that you practiced over and over again were the same movements your body fell back on when you didn't have the time to think. I was honing my very instinct.

Chapter 17:
The Battle They Were Waiting For

ON OUR LAST DAY OF TRAINING, Aaron taught me swordsmanship. Because our time together was limited, he focused on basic movements. Fighting stances, sword swings, and defensive parrying—Aaron passed these skills on to me in the way his ancestors had passed their knowledge down to Aaron himself.

For this particular practice session, I wasn't using Greed. Instead, I held a stripped wooden branch. I wouldn't have been able to concentrate with Greed's sarcastic comments cutting into my practice, and I couldn't waste this opportunity to learn from Aaron. So, Greed spent the day baking in the sun alongside Myne's black axe, Sloth.

I was intent on making the most of the time Aaron and I had together. I put my heart and soul into absorbing all of his teachings.

"Keep your arms in tight," Aaron said. "Bend your knees slightly, and let your posture drop with your center of balance."

"Like this?"

"Hm. Almost."

Aaron stood in front of me and demonstrated the mid-level stance again. To me, his posture looked the same as the stance I'd already taken. However, Aaron taught me every move with great care and attention, so there must have been a difference.

My teacher had zero tolerance for even the slightest mistake. Because of his fastidiousness, my basic swordsmanship quickly improved. Aaron said my movements were already becoming less goblin-like, more human. The adjustment was natural, really. Until now, the wild way I swung my weapon about, copied from the enemies I'd fought, had defined my swordsmanship. Now, as I began to genuinely understand the weapon, I could wield my blade with certainty and intelligence.

I fixed my footing, and following Aaron's example, dropped into my own mid-level stance.

"How's this?"

"Hm. Much better," said Aaron. "Lower your sword a touch."

These tiny adjustments were difficult for me. I let the tip of my sword drop just a hint.

"Yes, like that. Make sure your body remembers this exact stance."

"Understood."

Satisfied with my efforts, Aaron slid his holy sword back into its scabbard.

"I think we've done enough stance work for the moment," said Aaron. "Now, I want you to parry my full strike."

"Wait, what? I'm, uh…I'm just wielding a wooden branch here, you know."

I could see it already: the golden sword splitting my branch in twain before I had a chance to parry, then slicing me into neat halves as the deadly stroke concluded. I shook my head to indicate *"No, no way,"* but Aaron gripped the handle of his holy blade decisively.

"Do just as I taught you, Fate. You'll be fine. With your eyes, you can do it."

He meant the red stare of my half-starved state. It was true enough that, because that state boosted my stats, following Aaron's movements was simple, especially with all the practice I'd been getting. However, the problem wasn't my eyes—it was whether my untrained body could keep up with my enhanced vision.

I'd never know if I could take it if I just stood there, thinking about things before they even started. Besides, parrying a holy sword with a whittled tree branch would be an impressive feat.

With that thought, my answer was decided. "Let's do it."

"Very good," Aaron said. "Here I come!"

He stepped forward, at once unleashing his sword from its sheath. He brought the blade up high and swung it toward me.

Thanks to my crimson eye, I saw his fluid movements in slow motion. I gripped the branch tight in my hand, recalling what Aaron had taught me in the past two days. I saw the arc of the blade, predicted the angle of attack. I did not aim to knock the sword completely off its trajectory, and instead met it at the curve of the arc to subtly shift it away from me.

Wood shavings, and a few strands of black hair, danced into the sky as Aaron's holy sword swept over my head. It was so close that I felt air from the passing blade across my face—but I'd succeeded. I deflected the blade.

It felt to me that I had succeeded *because* of the fragile tree branch. It had forced me to find the path of least resistance, lest I be sliced to pieces. Perhaps Aaron had known this all along, and this was the very reason he'd made me use the bough.

I would not forget the feeling of this technique. As I looked at the branch in my hand, a brittle stick ready to splinter at the slightest threat of stormy wind, Aaron smiled.

"Your training is now complete," he said. "We only had three short days, but you kept up with every one of my teachings. I have to say, your parrying technique is brilliant. Remember, Fate, the path toward mastery of the sword is not short. Be sure to sharpen your basic skills daily. You'll need to make the most of *all* your experiences to become a true master of the blade."

"Thank you, Aaron."

I had endured three days of grueling training, nonstop except for brief pauses for food and sleep. I was exhausted. I thought Aaron must have been too, but he didn't seem to be flagging in the least. Perhaps that was to be expected. In the last few days, he had also told me more of his past—about being the Blade of Light.

A long time ago, Aaron had earned the title “Blade of Light” from the King of Seifort. This was a great honor bestowed only on those who gave the kingdom many long years of their bravery and valor, and who defeated no small number of crowned beasts.

But Aaron insisted that he’d lost the right to that esteemed title. He said he had forsaken the right to it when he forsook his family, a treasure that, for him, was irreplaceable. Even standing in front of me as my teacher, he blamed himself for having been unable to defend what had truly mattered to him. I felt a loneliness emanate from him, one that spoke to the depths of his self-loathing. He keenly regretted the man he had been in the past, the knight who had single-mindedly slaughtered monsters to earn a title that couldn’t protect his family.

Aaron wiped the sweat from his forehead and smiled at me. “It’s going to be lonely here after you leave tomorrow.”

“I still have a lot to do,” I replied.

“Galia…a terrible country. I’d warn you not to go there, but I doubt you’d listen.”

During training, I’d told Aaron of my plan to go to Galia, although I hadn’t told him my reasons, or about Lady Roxy. For some reason, I’d expected Aaron to be shocked, but instead I only saw understanding in his face. Sooner or later, every skilled adventurer made Galia their aim.

Due to the abundance of monsters, the border of Galia was the ultimate hunting ground. All of the most worthwhile bounties prowled there. Every hunt was as dangerous as it was rewarding, and any hunt could be your last. Staking out that territory was the very definition of high risk, high reward. That was why all adventurers dreamed of one day venturing into deadly Galia and bringing home the huge bounty that’d finally set them up for a lifetime…if not multiple lifetimes.

“Fate, let me say one thing. If you’re going to Galia for the sake of somebody else, don’t. Life is fleeting in the country where the Heavenly Calamity roams the skies. You’ll use everything you have, everything you know, just to stay alive. You must not travel to such a place to fight for anyone other than yourself.”

“But even then, I…”

“I can see it in your movements, Fate. You’re no good at protecting others in battle.” Aaron fell into a short silence. “No, I’ll say no more. Your future rests in your own hands.”

He walked to the well to wash away the sweat of training. From where I stood, there was something lonely in his silent silhouette. Perhaps he was worried that I was going to Galia to die. It’d only been three days, but already, Aaron considered me his student.

I was ashamed to think that I’d taken his training as a simple convenience that suited my own ends. At the very least, today I could play my role as student and pull up the well water my teacher needed.

As I ran to catch up to Aaron, I heard Greed speak through Telepathy. "Adventurers like Aaron are the rarest kind. They're practically an endangered species. I haven't seen one in a long time, and this one even did you the favor of helping you grow stronger. Make sure to thank him from the heart, Fate."
"Don't worry, I hear you," I said.

***

Myne joined Aaron and I for our final dinner together. As usual, she looked deeply disinterested as she shoveled food into her mouth. Maybe she didn't like the boiled vegetable porridge, but I loved it.
"Myne," I said, "you make every meal look like it tastes terrible."
"I don't have a sense of taste," she said. "So, everything tastes the same."
Oh. I'd had no idea. I suddenly felt embarrassed about the countless times I'd commented on the food we were eating.
"It's nothing for you to worry about, Fate," said Myne, shrugging off my expression. "The decision was mine."
I had a feeling that her missing sense of taste was entwined with her Skill of Mortal Sin, but I was in no mood to pry. Tonight was my last dinner with Aaron, and I didn't want the moment to end up derailed and focused all on Myne.
But I was afraid it was too late. Aaron peered at Little Miss Wrathful and I with a mixture of curiosity and interest.
"Through all of my travels, you're the most competent adventurer I've ever met, Myne," he said. "The way you move and hold yourself, your strength of spirit…all of it, sharpened to a razor's edge. You've honed yourself to a level I can't even imagine reaching."
Myne didn't respond to his observations with her usual grim silence. Instead, she turned toward Aaron and spoke directly to him for the first time since they'd met. "Good eyes for an old man," she said. "I'll remember your name. With a thousand years of training, you might begin to reach my level."
Aaron laughed. "A thousand years? That's difficult to imagine—and perhaps difficult to achieve, for an old man like me."
"That's how it goes," said Myne. "You're only human. You have limits."
The way she said "only human" struck me. It was like she was talking about a different species, even though—however you looked at it—Myne was a human girl herself. Aaron didn't seem to feel the same suspicions I did. Perhaps he'd already made peace with Myne's strange bearing and presence, her detachment from society. Or perhaps he simply didn't consider her a threat to his village, and could therefore dismiss her eccentricities.
"Myne," Aaron said, "may I ask you one question?"
"You may."

Aaron set his spoon on the table. “Fifty years ago, after a large herd of monsters appeared east of here, I saw you. You looked exactly as you do now. The very image of the goddess of war. So, my question is…what are you, Myne?”
“I…am a spirit who is not allowed death. The person you saw was indeed me, but I don’t remember that day. I don’t remember insignificant battles.”
“Hunh. So, you consider even that battle an insignificant affair. You and I, Myne, we truly reside on different planes of existence.” Aaron stared at the ceiling for a moment as a battle fifty years past played through his memories. He smiled. “I never thought I’d encounter such a strange phenomenon at my age, I truly didn’t! It seems a long life is a treasure trove of surprises. In any case, I’m sorry to have interrupted your meal. Now, please, eat up. There’s plenty of porridge left for second and third helpings!”
With that, Aaron and Myne fell into a comfortable silence as they turned their attention back to their food. The two had found common ground, although I had no idea what battle they had been talking about. Nevertheless, Myne’s words sat uneasily in my mind, particularly the bit about her being “not allowed death.” Did she mean she was immortal? Or did she simply not age? I remembered Greed saying she was an acquaintance of sorts, which made me think that perhaps she’d been around for a *very* long time.
As these thoughts swam in my head, Gluttony clawed at me angrily, aggressively. I’d held it down, forcing it to endure hunger for the three days since we arrived. Now, if I left it unfed much longer, Gluttony would become fully starved. I was nearing my limit.
“I’m sorry, Aaron,” I said. “The meal you prepared tonight is wonderful, but I…”
Aaron looked at me with concern. “Fate, what’s wrong? You don’t look well.”
“Aaron, I…I have to go hunt them. The monsters. There’s a nest…or gathering…in the old castle west of here, isn’t there?”
The old knight continued to look at my red eye without flinching. I hesitated at first, but eventually, it was too much. He was my teacher; I wanted to trust him. I gave in.
I told Aaron the story of my Gluttony, and that I could only maintain control by hunting monsters. Aaron didn’t seem afraid, and he didn’t doubt a single word I spoke. He believed it all. The moment he’d seen my red eye and the pain it caused me, he’d become convinced I carried some dark burden.
“So, if you don’t hunt, the weight on your soul grows heavier,” Aaron mused.
“I’ve gotten used to it, for the most part,” I said. “But it seems, despite my training, I still don’t have as much control of Gluttony as I thought.”
“Now, to release yourself from that weight, you want to go hunt at the old castle?”

“Yes.”
I’d felt the presence since the minute I’d entered my half-starved state. Outside, during training, I’d caught the ambrosial scent of a powerful monster drifting on the wind from the direction of the old castle. A day earlier, Aaron had told me a little about the place, though I’d thought he was being intentionally vague.
“There’s a powerful crowned beast to the west,” he’d said. “Most monsters that find their way here, to this village, come from that castle.”
“Aaron, I know you didn’t want to tell me yesterday, but I’ll ask again. Why won’t you cut those monsters off at the pass? Finish them off?”
I didn’t expect him to answer, but on that night, Aaron changed. He looked over at the portrait of his family resting on the shelf by his bed and closed his eyes. Slowly, he spoke. “That place… A long time ago, it was my castle. And my family…they’re still there.”
So, the castle in the background of the picture…it was the same one. As I’d vaguely suspected when I first saw the portrait, the estate once belonged to Aaron. If Aaron’s family were still in the castle, though… How? In what form could they possibly exist among monsters?
“The monster that inhabits the castle is a lich lord, a crowned beast which bears the name ‘The Genesis of Death.’ It controls the dead. It used my wife, my son…my people…as a shield against me. I was powerless.”
Sadness—no, despair—reflected upon Aaron’s face as he stared at the picture on his shelf.
He turned back to me, his gaze resolute. “Perhaps your arrival was destiny after all,” he said. “You may present my last chance to free myself from the shackles of my past.”
“Aaron…”
“I will take you to the castle,” he continued. “After all, I know it like the back of my hand. May I ask for the honor of fighting alongside you, Fate?”
This time, I didn’t hesitate. “Of course. We’re stronger together.”
“Thank you. We haven’t a moment to lose, then.”
As Aaron and I began to prepare for battle, Myne sat alone at the table, still eating. I wasn’t sure whether she was uninterested in fighting, or simply in following our conversation.
When our preparations for leaving were complete, Aaron addressed Myne. “My apologies, but I need someone to stay and protect the village while we’re gone. May I ask that of you, Myne?”
“You can,” she said. “But it’ll cost you five gold.”
I couldn’t believe she’d ask for money at an emotional time like this. I stepped in to say something, but Aaron raised a hand to stop me.
“A warrior of your caliber? Five coins?” he shook his head. “You undersell yourself. There is still treasure in the coffers of the old castle. Upon our safe return, I will pay you fifty.”

The tiniest hint of a smile crept over Myne's otherwise expressionless face. Clearly her thoughts had turned toward her own village, and Aaron's offer was too good to pass up.

"You have yourself a deal," Myne said, and she immediately set down her bowl to pick up her black axe. Then she began swinging it—indoors, much to my dismay.

But as Aaron and I headed outside, Myne paused her combat exercises for a moment to call out to me. "Don't go dying out there, Fate. I still need you."

"Don't worry," I said. "I have no intention of dying until I reach Galia."

"Good," Myne said. The change was subtle, but I noticed something like relief in her features.

With that, Aaron and I headed for the old castle to the west.

Chapter 18:
The City of the Dead

AARON AND I walked a dilapidated, run-down path between fields by the warm light of the setting sun. I activated my Night Vision to help me navigate the fading twilight.
“Ah, so you have the Night Vision skill, I see,” said Aaron.
Did anything escape the old knight’s notice?!
“You can tell?”
“I have it also, and I can see the skill in the way you move.”
This wasn’t all that surprising. Aaron clearly had no trouble navigating around the rocks and fallen trees strewn across our path. Rather, I wasn’t quite sure what to make of Aaron’s own surplus of skills—he seemed to possess far more than most adventurers I’d met. Just from what I’d seen, he had Identify, Conceal, and Night Vision. It was also safe to assume he had the Holy Sword Technique, given that he fought with the necessary weapon. Because he used Conceal to hide his skills, however, I couldn’t truly know how many abilities he had.
Aaron seemed to read the curiosity in my gaze as I studied him. “You’re probably wondering exactly how many skills I have. I wonder the same about you, Fate. Would you consider deactivating Conceal so that I might see them?”
“Those are one thing I really can’t show you,” I said.
“I expected as much. After all, what’s the point of a Conceal skill that goes unused?”
Despite his request, Aaron showed no sign of sharing his list of skills with me, either. In that regard, we were the same.
We proceeded farther and farther west, and as we walked, the earthen path became a road paved with stone. Mist rose from the ground around us. Through the white haze, an enormous castle towered ahead of us: an old fortress, surrounded by a city. The ruins gave the impression that, once upon a time, it had been a lively, energetic city.
Aaron gazed at the cast as well, and he spoke its name with nostalgia heavy in his voice. “And so my journey brings me back to Hausen.”
“Hausen…”
“Yes, the name of the territory I once governed. The city of Hausen, stolen from me by the lich lord.”
In my half-starved state, I easily sensed the crowned beast’s presence. The lich lord’s scent wafted from the old castle, and the aroma was unbearably tempting. Gluttony pulled me toward it, urging me to defeat and devour it. When Gluttony hungered, it cared not for any torture it put me through. I pressed a hand to my right eye.
“Does it hurt?” Aaron asked, worried.

“It does, but it’s bearable. For now.”
“Once we enter Hausen, the fight’s on. Skeleton knights and skeleton archers patrol the outskirts of the castle. The knights should prove no issue; I’ve taught you everything you need to handle them. But be careful of the archers. They’ll attack from well outside of our strike zone. I can stop their arrows with my blade, but I suspect that technique may still be a bit difficult for you.”
“Let me handle the archers,” I said.
Dodging and slicing arrows fired at me from every direction certainly did sound dangerous. That was why I intended to stop the archers before they even had a chance to fire.
“How, Fate?” Aaron glanced at my blade—the black sword Greed—and narrowed his eyes with skepticism. As far as he could see, it was a normal sword, offering no long-distance support.
Explaining would take too long. I drew Greed and transformed the black sword into the black bow. “This is how.”
“What a fascinating piece of equipment—a weapon that changes form. Can it become anything else?”
“A scythe, at times.”
“Most impressive. I’ve never seen anything like it!” Aaron chuckled. “The longer you live, the more you learn. Very well, I’ll leave the archers to you. You leave the knights that block our path to me.”
Now, Hausen’s gate loomed before us. The gigantic doors listed open, wrecked and broken, which at least made for easy entry. Before we got inside, however, we had to handle the monsters that stumbled forth from the ruins. Skeleton knights emerged, lurching toward us while they clutched rusty two-handed swords. Above them, eyeless skeleton archers peered out from the high walls surrounding the city, their bows aimed directly at us.
To get a better sense of the foes we faced, I used Identify.

Skeleton Knight, Lv 35
Vitality: 2,290
Strength: 2,540
Magic: 1,230
Spirit: 1,120
Agility: 1,740
Skills: Two-Handed Sword Technique, Agility Boost (Low)

Skeleton Archer, Lv 35
Vitality: 1,290
Strength: 1,440
Magic: 1,110
Spirit: 1,230
Agility: 770

Skills: Bow Technique, Marksmanship

These skeletons were little more than minnows swarming between me and my feast. I already had Two-Handed Sword Technique, but I didn't have Agility Boost (Low), so I'd be sure to help myself to that skill. I was curious about Bow Technique and Marksmanship, so I Identified those two more closely.

Bow Technique: Increases bow attack power. Unlocks the tech-art "Charged Shot."
Marksmanship: Increases bow's effective firing range.

The Marksmanship skill was a dangerous one, but it paled in comparison to the base abilities of the black bow. Greed could hit anything regardless of distance, so long as the target was within my field of vision. The Charged Shot tech-art increased an arrow's ability to pierce the flesh and armor of enemies based on how long an arrow was notched, pulled, and readied to fire. Not bad.
If the fifty skeleton archers taking aim above us combined Charged Shot and Marksmanship, the ensuing flurry of arrows would be too furious to defend against. I had to shoot first.
"Aaron, I'll start on the archers. Good luck with the knights."
"Can you hit them from this range?"
"They won't be a problem. Every shot will find its mark."
I aimed at one far-off archer and fired a magic arrow from the black bow. It sped through the air and straight between the eyes of the archer.
"That's one down. Wait…what?!"
The archer I'd just hit lurched back to its feet as if nothing had happened. Aaron laughed.
"Your magic bow is truly impressive, but arrows alone won't kill the undead. To bring one down, you'll have to do this!"
Aaron ran his sword through the ribs of an approaching skeleton knight. He lifted the skeleton into the air and imbued the sword with holy magic. All around him, white light emanated from the ground at the feet of the surrounding skeleton knights. He had activated the Holy Sword tech-art "Grand Cross."
Compared to the meager version of Grand Cross I'd seen Hado Vlerick wield, Aaron's execution of the technique was on an entirely different scale. His attack range was far wider, for one. With a single use, he wiped out a group of nearly a hundred skeleton knights.
At the same time, I wished he'd left at least one on the field for me to steal a skill from. But being able to think such thoughts in the heat of battle was, truthfully, a luxury. I needed to concentrate.
"*There's* how to fight the undead," said Aaron. "Think you can handle it?"
"I'll find a way."

It wasn't a matter of *whether* I could handle this method of combat. If we wanted to get inside Hausen, I *had* to.
When Aaron used a holy skill to attack the undead, he had shown me what to do: imbue my attack with elemental magic. He had used holy magic, but I would use Fireball. My fiery plan was instantly followed by a better idea.
Through the black bow, Greed felt my intent. I heard the grin in his voice as he spoke. *"An interesting attack you've got in mind, Fate…"*
"I just think fire might be overdoing it. Plus, it takes too long to light each arrow. This is quick *and* effective!"
I readied the black bow and aimed at the same skeleton archer I'd knocked down earlier. This time, I imbued the arrow with Sandstorm, the spell I'd taken from the sand golem. The bronzed arrow, glimmering with a sandy shell of elemental earth magic, darted through the air and once again pierced deep between the eye sockets of the archer. On hit, the archer turned to stone. In a matter of seconds, it hardened into a dusty, unmoving statue.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +1,290, Strength +1,440, Magic +1,110, Spirit +1,230, Agility +770. New skills added: Bow Technique, Marksmanship.

I was already moving on to my next target as the metallic voice echoed inside my skull.
Aaron watched me at work, impressed. "A weapon you can load with magic…" he said. "The Kingdom of Seifort experimented with that concept for a time, but it proved too dangerous to control. All our tests ended in explosions, and the test subjects died in the destruction. Since then, the kingdom has put a halt to all attempts at combining magic with bows. And yet here you are, doing it with such ease. That's quite the secret weapon you've been hiding, Fate!"
I laughed, suddenly shy. "It's not *that* amazing… It's just…arrows…with magic."
Even though Aaron showered me with praise, the truth was that I barely had anything to do with the strategy. Greed did all the heavy lifting. The black sword was full of surprises.
Hearing Aaron's words himself, Greed wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to comment. "Now do you finally understand the overwhelming superiority of the mighty Greed, Fate? Worship me! Worship me, and kneel before my strength! From this day forth, you may call me the great Lord Greed! Do you hear me, Fate?!"
"Keep your new name to yourself," I muttered.
I had bigger things to worry about than my sword letting his power get to his head. I had an army of skeleton archers to bring down.
I would not allow a single monster to survive.

Chapter 19:
The Power of Master and Apprentice

THE SKELETON ARCHERS manning Hausen's walls were now little more than dead stone statues. It was quite the sight to behold: an army of archers frozen at their stations, their arrows pulled back and ready to fire.
"Excellent work, Fate," Aaron exclaimed. "Now, let's head inside!"
I followed after Aaron. We passed through the wreckage of the outer castle gate, into the city. I had expected more skeleton knights to attack the instant we entered, but we saw no sign of monsters on the streets. Instead, the entire city was eerily quiet. I warily examined the empty streets and houses as we moved.
"Now that we've taken care of the undead guarding the gate, the others have become aware of our presence. I expect more skeleton knights are even now marching toward us. Let's head down the main street, straight to the castle, before they can intercept. With you here, those archers won't be a problem. Can I count on you for that, Fate?"
"Of course, Aaron."
The city of Hausen was about half the size of Seifort. Nonetheless, it was huge. How many skeleton knights and archers hid within these buildings? Just thinking about it sent a shiver up my spine. Bringing them all down would take at least a week, if not longer.
Soon, waves of skeletons would be on us like ants on honey, just as Aaron said. We'd killed more than a hundred undead just to breach the gate, and those kills had built up a fair share of hate. No more slow readying of weapons—now, the skeletons would attack us on sight.
"We'll have to make a run for it. Are you ready, Fate?" Aaron asked.
"Of course. I'll keep an eye on the rooftops."
"And I will cut down anything that stands in our way. Let's go!"
We ran as fast as our Agility stats allowed, dashing down the city's main street side by side. Forty skeleton knights appeared before us like a wall of bones and rusted swords. Above them, skeleton archers leered out from the rooftops of the main street's abandoned shopping district. Behind us, the clacking of dry bone on cobblestone echoed as more undead followed in hot pursuit. Their strategy was clear—catch us in a pincer attack, letting the archers rain arrows down on us while we were busy engaging the surrounding knights. Though these skeletons' hollow skulls lacked brains, they still strategized. Well, more than goblins and kobolds did, at least.
The pincer attack would have worked on ordinary adventurers, but this was the holy knight Aaron, the Blade of Light. He had achieved the ultimate rank in Seifort, and I was his quick-learning apprentice. We would not be defeated so easily.

“Fate!” shouted Aaron. “Ignore the enemies to the rear. Focus on breaking through and keep moving forward! If we stop, we die!”
I knew my task. I aimed the black bow and loosed a series of magic arrows, each aimed at one of the skeleton archers pointing their own arrows back at us. I didn’t need to take out all the archers yet. I only needed to buy us enough time to make it into the castle. As the first wave of archers readied their bows, the black bow shot them down.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +12,900, Strength +14,400, Magic +11,100, Spirit +12,300, Agility +7,700.

I shouted to Aaron as the metallic voice echoed in my head. “Aaron, you’re clear!”
“Leave the rest to me!”
Aaron charged another Grand Cross as he ran, but the tech-art didn’t simply flare around him. Instead, only his golden blade glowed. Then, sword shining with holy light, he mowed through the skeletons between us and the castle.
“Listen well, Fate! I told you that imbuing bows with magic was almost impossible, but there are a variety of other ways to give weapons elemental attributes. Take my sword, for example. Grand Cross is a holy tech-art, but I can transfer its charge into my blade, imbuing it with the holy element. This is a relatively easy skill to master, so remember it!”
I was amazed. Aaron could lecture me on the finer points of swordsmanship even in the thick of battle. Now, he’d taught me that you could charge weapons with tech-arts, letting them strike with elemental abilities. That would prove very useful, especially because tech-arts often required large quantities of magical power to execute. Grand Cross in particular required an immense amount. It was a devastating elemental attack, but its cost resulted in a lengthy period of recharging between each use. Aaron had found techniques to balance that cost.
The question was, could I do it? It might be an easy technique for the Blade of Light, but that didn’t mean it would be remotely simple for the rest of us. One of my major takeaways over the last three days had been that Aaron was, indubitably, a virtuoso. He existed on a different level from normal humans.
During training, I’d been amazed to find that Aaron could somehow dodge attacks with his eyes closed. For him, that sort of skill came naturally, though he’d claimed in complete seriousness that I could do it too. I’d replied, just as seriously, “I don’t have a third eye.” If I fell into a full starvation state, perhaps Gluttony’s ability boost would give me similar abilities, but exploring that possibility was too extreme a risk.
Aaron and I charged straight toward the castle, carving a deadly path through the skeleton knights in our way. The castle stood tall, still far off in the distance. Inside it lurked the lich lord named The Genesis of Death. It

must have known we were coming. It had to have heard and seen the clamor of battle. I expected a trap—something to ensnare us on our way inside—but even as we advanced down the streets, we ran into nothing of the sort, just more undead.

Skeletons bore down upon us from every angle, alley, and rooftop. As we fought our way through the horde, I finally managed to kill a skeleton knight, snagging its Agility Boost. Now, I had no other skills to worry about acquiring in the city streets.

In some ways, the city felt as though, at one exact point in time in the past, it had simply stopped. Even though the city had once been home to a bounty of experienced adventurers, there were no signs of battle. No signs of struggles or fights. Outside of the damage we caused in our fight with the skeletons, the city seemed to have been preserved just as it was the day it was overthrown.

It was as though an unrelenting force had overwhelmed the citizens of Hausen, leaving none a chance to resist. Life had simply been crushed from existence. And that overwhelming force, the lich lord, had made a home of the castle we now approached.

The grand gate into the castle hung from its hinges in a state of disrepair similar to Hausen's outer gate. There was something eerily calculating in the way the lich lord had only used the force necessary to batter down both gates, and had otherwise wrought no damage upon the city infrastructure.

"Aaron," I said, "may I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"The lich lord. Is it as smart as a human?"

"That's what they say. It was clearly cunning enough to launch its siege at a time when it knew I wouldn't be there to defend my home. To best the lich lord, you'll need to utilize all the skills I've taught you."

Behind his words was a gentle reminder: Do not treat this as a battle with a crowned beast. Rather, approach your enemy as though it is an intelligent being. You will not slay this monster through sheer power alone.

The lich lord was a crowned beast capable of tactical attacks and mental warfare. It was exactly the kind of enemy I wanted to face before I got to Galia.

My Gluttony was still not satiated by the souls of the undead we had slain. I knew what it hungered for. It craved the source of the mouthwatering aroma that wafted from deep within the castle. Hunger pangs cried through my body: *feed me, feed me!* Gluttony's urges had never pulled me along so forcefully. If my concentration slipped, I might plunge into full, uncontrollable starvation.

As Aaron and I passed through the shattered gate and into the castle, the skeleton knights suddenly stopped at the threshold behind us. They hovered by the gate, glaring in wait, each seeming somehow disappointed.

"It seems we've entered the lich lord's territory," said Aaron. "The other monsters don't dare enter."

“There’s not a single skeleton in here,” I said, glancing around the empty castle courtyard.
“When I last came here, the situation was very different. Don’t be fooled; don’t let your guard down.”
Together, Aaron and I dashed through the decaying central garden, looking for a place to enter the castle keep proper. The entire time we searched, we heard only one thing—complete silence.

Chapter 20:
Cleansing Light

FINALLY, AT THE FAR END of the central gate, we found an entrance, door opened wide, welcoming us into the keep… Clearly an invitation.
“Let’s go, Fate.”
“But, Aaron…”
I had a bad feeling, an uneasy pit in my stomach that I couldn’t fill, even with the promise of the meal awaiting my Gluttony. Was stepping into this obvious trap really the best way to proceed?
Aaron put a hand on my shoulder. “You can feel it, can’t you? You know the lich lord is in there, watching us. Regardless of the path we take, regardless of which door we venture through, the evil that awaits us on the other side will not change.”
“Yeah… Okay, let’s go.”
Aaron was right. There was no way for us but forward. Although we both hoped we would arrive at the lich lord’s lair without further battles, I saw in Aaron’s face that he, too, knew better. The sweat dripping down his brow made evident that sordid memories of his last visit to this haunted place had revived within him.
Aaron entered the keep, and I followed close behind. The entrance hall was nothing like the ruin we’d expected.
“What…what is this?” I murmured.
Inside, each and every room and doorway was brightly lit. At the end of the main hall, a swollen group of people had gathered, alive, all smiling and calling to us, waving in our direction.
“This is impossible… It can’t be… All of them, they should be…” Aaron could barely form coherent sentences. His unsheathed sword dropped to his side. It took everything he had just to explain what was happening.
This was not what had happened last time.
The last time Aaron had come to Hausen, the lich lord had reanimated the citizens’ corpses, puppeteering them like macabre marionettes and forcing Aaron to retreat at the hands of his own people.
This time, somehow, the lich lord had returned those citizens to life. From the center of that cheerful crowd, two people emerged. One was a very young boy, the other a young woman, richly dressed. They gazed at Aaron with heart-wrenching joy in their eyes.
“Father?!” cried the boy.
“Darling, you’re back,” said the young woman. “I’ve waited for you for so long.”
Aaron’s expression froze. I tried speaking to him, but he didn’t—or couldn’t—respond. Instead, he stared in speechless disbelief at his smiling wife and son. His loving family. The dead, now living.

How can this be possible? I thought.
“This is bad, Fate,” said Greed. “This is the spell Hallucination. The lich lord’s using it to make the dead look like they’ve returned to life.”
“In that case,” I said, slowly shifting the black sword in my hands into the black scythe, “we’ll sever the illusion with this blade.”
“Fate, wait. What are you going to sever? Cutting down these meat-puppets won’t do anything. You have to find the spellcaster. Only by attacking the lich lord itself can you negate its Hallucination spell.”
I transformed Greed back into the black sword and clenched the hilt tight in my fist. The black scythe’s power was useless against secondary effects like this large-scale Hallucination. Cutting down the people who stood before us would do nothing to disperse the spell if they hadn’t been created by it. And, even if they were long dead, I couldn’t bear to cut them down so recklessly. They weren’t monsters—they were the people Aaron had come to free from the grasp of the lich lord. That was why he had retreated at the end of every previous attempt. Killing his family, his citizens, to get to the lich lord would be antithetical to Aaron’s wishes.
As I stared at the smiling people trapped under the lich lord’s spell, I asked Greed a question that had been bothering me since we entered the hall.
“Greed, if I kill these people…if I cut them down…what happens to them?”
“There are still human souls trapped in their sorry corpses, and Gluttony will feast upon them. Why? Is there a problem?”
“But what happens after that? I want to know what takes place after a soul is consumed. If I killed them—if I ate them—would these people pass on to the afterlife?”
Greed knew exactly what I was asking. He held the answer I needed—the answer I dreaded.
“Normally, I’d just tell you there are some truths in this world that you’re better off not knowing, but…you really do need this one, don’t you? Well, I guess there’s no better time.” This awkward skirting around the issue was unusual for Greed, but after some muttering, he continued. “Any soul devoured by Gluttony is cursed to reside eternally within Gluttony. These damned souls swirl and fuse with one another in a boundless hell from which there is no escape and no salvation.”
I’d felt that truth deep within, but all the same, I didn’t expect so chilling an answer. My heart ached. How would it have felt to hear these words if, at some point along my travels, I’d killed someone genuinely good? Not Hado, or thieves and kidnappers, but someone like Aaron or Lady Roxy.
Was this what Greed and Myne meant when they spoke of how others would react to learning of my Skill of Mortal Sin?
In any case, I could not kill the people of Hausen. They were being controlled by the lich lord and turned against Aaron as weapons of hate. I would not doom them to the hell of Gluttony.

But where was that damn lich hiding? The scent of the crowned beast filled the grand hall, but I couldn't zero in. Was the Hallucination spell confusing my senses as well?

I clicked my tongue in frustration. *What should I do?*

By my side, Aaron stood transfixed, spellbound by his family as they approached him step by step. More than anyone, he *had* to know they were merely an illusion. However, now that they stood right in front of him—the thing he wanted most—he couldn't bring himself to deny them.

I knew how he felt. I did. If the ones before me were my own father and mother, I would have reacted the same way. But I had to snap him out of it, and I had to do it now.

"Aaron!"

I needed to wake him from the spell. I reached out to grab his collar, but before I could seize the cloth, he quietly shook his head. Despite everything, part of him still resisted the spell.

"I'm fine. I just fell back for a moment…into the past." He scratched the back of his head as though he were merely embarrassed. "When you get to my age, Fate, you'll find yourself getting too attached to all these old memories."

Then he brought his sword back up to guard and turned his attention back to his family. "I'm sorry I was away for so long," he said to them. "But now I am here, and I will set you free."

As soon as this promise left his lips, the grandiose lights of the hall winked out into darkness. The once-beautiful walls of the castle eroded, paint peeling and stone cracking. The castle was returning to its true form.

Around us, the smiling faces of the castle citizens decayed from life into twisted, snarling visages of hatred. Each person carried a hoe, hatchet, or axe. Aaron's wife held a wand, while his son clutched the hilt of a holy sword.

"How could you, father?" shouted the boy. "You abandoned us! You were always so busy with your duties that you didn't raise a hand when the monsters fell upon us. Now, you come back to *kill* us?!"

"Darling, please!" cried Aaron's wife. "Please, you must reconsider. Look at us. We're all still alive, my darling. Put your sword down. Join us. We'd be so much safer with a holy knight to watch over and protect us. Please, come to me."

Behind Aaron's wife and son, the castle's withered dead—once Aaron's citizens—began berating him. Blaming him. Criticizing him. They called for him to help them, to save them.

Even through this assault, Aaron would not lower his sword. "Sorry, Fate, but I need you to let me handle my family and people on my own."

That was a relief. I couldn't fight them without damning them. "All right. I'll find the lich lord. I can tell he's around here somewhere."

"Then let's get to it."

Aaron took a deep breath, then charged toward the shambling corpses of his wife and son. I transformed the black sword into the black bow and looked for a route around the snarling dead bodies, toward the back of the main hall. I needed to find the lich lord while Aaron kept the dead occupied. The clash of holy blade against holy blade rang through the hall, followed by Aaron's voice.

"I'm impressed!" he shouted. "You've gotten stronger since I've been away, son! I'm glad to see you've been practicing, just like I told you."

It was a hollow attempt at conversation, and no response echoed in the hall save for the empty clashing of blades. I needed to end this. I shoved a few corpses bodily out of the way and proceeded deeper into the dim hall. Suddenly, I felt Gluttony pulse in my red eye. I noticed the environment waver slightly, as if the castle air was folding in on itself.

"Greed," I said, "is that what I think it is?"

"It very much looks like it. As your Gluttony calls you to your prey, so must you respond in kind. Feast! But do not lose yourself to the hunger!"

I only wanted him to confirm my instinct, not tell me crap I already knew, but I didn't have time to answer. I dodged through the roiling wave of oncoming corpses, launching myself into the air where they couldn't reach me. Midair, I nocked my bow with a magic arrow and charged it with Sandstorm.

"Defile this!" I shouted as I loosed the arrow toward my prey.

The arrow disappeared into the strange, barely visible, shimmering patch of air. A scream pierced the castle as the arrow struck the lich. As the shrill cry echoed, an oversized, skeletal arm crashed to the floor, transformed entirely into stone. In the next instant, the lich lord revealed itself: a bony giant surrounded in swirling black mist, its scythe held high as though it were the avatar of Death itself.

I immediately used Identify on the beast.

The Genesis of Death
Lich Lord, Lv 100
Vitality: 3,640,000
Strength: 2,560,000
Magic: 4,565,000
Spirit: 4,346,000
Agility: 2,347,000
Skills: Hallucination (Spell), Magic Boost (High), Spirit Boost (High)

The lich lord's Magic and Spirit stats were over four million each… What would it feel like when I ate it? I'd never consumed a monster with over one million stat points. Though I'd trained myself for weeks now to control Gluttony, would that be enough? I keenly remembered devouring my first crowned beast back at the Hart family estate. The taste of the kobold

warrior's soul had been so exquisite that Gluttony and I had descended into a fit of senseless ecstasy.
But I didn't have time to think it through.
"We don't have time for your wimpy little worries, Fate! I, the mighty Greed, hereby guarantee your well-being. Eat your fill, and you will be fine. I swear it. But, for now, put aside such petty concerns! It's time for you to show me these fine new skills you've learned!"
"Then prepare to be impressed."
Greed laughed. "That's my boy! That's the spirit I like! Anything less, and I might die from sheer boredom."
I was not in the mood for another round of the lich lord's Hallucination spell. I unleashed my Agility stat to its maximum and leapt at the lich lord as it backed up toward the wall.
I transformed Greed back into the black sword. It was time to test myself in real battle. The lich lord took a step forward, readying its scythe to strike. From its stance and how it balanced its weight, I could tell it was trying to bait me into the range of a counterattack.
I decided to call its bluff.
I maneuvered in, closing the gap between us. The lich lord was easily two-and-a-half times bigger than I was, so if I got past the space it needed to swing its scythe, I could take away its ability to defend against my blade. The lich lord knew its limitations as well, and it would aim to fight from a distance. As long as I fought up close and personal, though, it didn't stand a chance.
"You really have improved," said Greed.
"I can't be a rookie my whole damned life."
"Fair point! Carry on."
I parried the lich lord's weak opening slashes, then stepped in and, with a strong upward stroke, sent its scythe flying. I took the monster by surprise, yanking its remaining arm in the direction of its weapon, and pulling it off-balance as I continued to step into severing range. The lich lord's right arm was now mine.
The lich lord's rattling shriek again rang through the halls, together with the clang of its scythe dropping to the floor. Even disarmed, though, the lich lord showed no intent to surrender. It lurched backward, seizing control of the corpses behind me, and using them to attack me instead. The sudden change in direction and movement, as if an invisible string had jerked them, caused limbs to fall from the rotting bodies. They were the puppets of the monster, lacking reason and logic.
Even knowing this was their miserable existence, my hands were bound. I would not attack the corpses that lumbered toward me. If Gluttony consumed them, they were doomed to an eternity of suffering that I suspected was far worse than even this.
The twisted, shriveled flesh of the lich lord formed a morbid smile around rotten teeth as it watched me avoid the corpses. Then, pulling itself to its

true height, the crowned beast had the citizen's corpses form a gruesome wall around it.
"It knows I won't attack the citizens," I said.
"Tough break," said Greed. "So, what now, Fate? Fight through the corpses to devour the lich lord?"
"I can't. These people would all be sent to eternal hell, wouldn't they?"
"Indeed. But good intentions alone won't get you through this battle."
Maybe Greed was right, but there was one thing he'd forgotten: for once, I was not alone. I felt a wave of relief at the sound of familiar footsteps approaching from behind.
"Fate! Sorry I'm late." That unwavering, valiant voice belonged to Aaron, who was now equipped with one gleaming holy sword in each hand.
"Aaron," I said. "Your family, your people…what happened?"
"They won't be joining us anytime soon. I severed the tendons in their arms and legs. They're immobile."
To be capable of such deft precision work in the most heartbreakingly dire of circumstances… Aaron was truly unparalleled. Still, even he grimaced in disgust at the sight before him now: a writhing wall of dead bodies that had once belonged to his people protecting the lich lord.
"And, again, it comes to this," he muttered. "Always, in its desperation, the beast resorts to this…"
With that, Aaron plunged one holy sword into the stone floor of the hall. The other, he began to charge with holy magic, readying the Grand Cross.
"Aaron?!" I shouted.
"Fear not, Fate," he replied. "I should have done this a long time ago. If I had, we never would have been forced into this hellish fight."
Seeing the burning light emanating from Aaron's sword, the lich lord scrambled for a counterattack. It used Hallucination to make the corpses cry out. They begged us for help, they pleaded with Lord Aaron to save them, but through the wailing, Aaron continued to channel the tech-art into his blade.
When the sword he wielded was fully imbued, he unleashed Grand Cross onto the lich lord. Holy light filled the castle, pulsing up the walls. The citizens of Hausen melted into the blinding energy, their souls cleansed by the holy light. All that remained was the lich lord, whose immense Magic and Spirit stats had let it endure Aaron's attack.
Aaron grit his teeth and began charging the sword again, but his face was pallid. Blood leaked through his armor from a wound in his side. The work of disabling his beloved opponents rather than killing them had come with a heavy price.
I stared at the holy sword plunged into the floor next to Aaron.
"One time, and one time only. You use that sword to help Aaron, and that's the last time you ever use another sword. Ever."

It was Greed’s voice at my side. The black sword, who openly detested the very idea of me wielding any weapon other than itself, was giving me this one chance.
I took it. I wrenched the second holy sword from the floor and placed it against Aaron’s glimmering weapon, our blades crossing.
Aaron glanced over at me, shocked.
“Fate, what are you doing?!”
“Let me help.”
For the first time in my life, I began to charge the tech-art Grand Cross. I poured into it my magic and my resolve, and I watched as the holy blade began to shine white.
“Fate, you have…”
“I know. Now, let’s end this.”
“Yes,” Aaron said. “Once and for all.”
We poured all of our power into our shining blades. Our voices called out as one.
“Grand Cross!”
The castle was radiant with our combined light. In that instant, everything we could see was overtaken in burning, holy white.

Chapter 21:
New Possibilities

THE LIGHT FADED to reveal a beaten, broken lich lord slumped against the wall. The battle was over. Our double Grand Cross had broken through the crowned beast's Magic stats and inflicted upon it a fatal wound.
As the lich lord's power faded, so too did its control over the dead. As we watched, the citizens' souls were released from the prison of their bodies. The old corpses had been pushed well past their limits, and the dead bodies that once blocked Aaron's path with intertwined, rotting arms now crumbled into peaceful dust.
We had no time to lose.
"Aaron," I said. "Your family. We have to get to them, quickly!"
We ran back the way we came, apprehension in Aaron's eyes and spreading into his furrowed expression.
We found Aaron's wife and son lying on the floor next to each other. They were already disintegrating, their legs crumbling into dust. As Aaron took his place at their sides, his wife and son slowly opened their eyes to look at him.
Was the lich lord's will still controlling their corpses? I gripped the hilt of the black sword tight, my senses on highest alert. Instead of the presence of the monster, I noticed something strange: there was life in their sunken eyes. They did not gaze at Aaron with the hollow stare of undead puppets.
"Father…" his son said.
"My darling," said Aaron's wife. "I'm…I'm so sorry…"
Aaron threw his sword to the ground and fell to his knees before them, gripping their hands tightly in his own.
How is this happening? I thought. Aaron's family died long, long ago…
"Remember what I told you?" asked Greed. "The souls of these people were trapped in their corpses. When they were released from the lich lord's control, their souls were granted this instant of freedom. But it is only an instant."
"I see…"
Was this moment of freedom truly a good thing? I feared it would only deepen the grief in Aaron's heart. Then again, perhaps this chance was what he had yearned for all along.
As they spoke, I watched silently over the three: Aaron, his wife, and his son.
"Father, I'm sorry…I couldn't protect the castle. I couldn't protect it and… even in death I was made a puppet… I attacked you…"
"You don't have to worry about any of that now," Aaron said, his face and voice gentle. "I should have been there with you. I should have been with you far more than I was. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Aaron's wife covered his hand with her own. "My darling, you did nothing wrong. There was nothing else you could have done. And, in the end, you saved us. Freed us. You have to move on and walk the path you believe in as the Blade of Light."
"Don't worry about us," said his son. "We'll be fine, Father."
The two faded further and further into dust. Their grips weakened even as they gazed up at Aaron. Time was running out.
A single tear ran down Aaron's face as he smiled at his family. "With the time I have left, I'll live a life you will be proud of. So…you don't have to worry about me, either."
Aaron's wife and son smiled back, and in the next moment, his family's bodies dissipated completely. All that remained were two small spheres of pale-blue light. The spheres swirled upward from the last scatterings of dust, hovering in the air as they drifted around Aaron.
"Greed, what are those?" I whispered.
"Their souls. When a soul fills with a strong enough emotion, it becomes visible. This is how much they loved him."
"Ah. A precious farewell in their final moments…"
"Indeed. However, Fate, we still have unfinished business…"
He was talking about Gluttony. Even now, the metallic voice still hadn't activated, and that meant that the lich lord was still alive. That monster was nothing if not a persistent thorn in our side. I turned back to the hall, only to find the lich lord crawling along the ground, dragging itself toward us inch by inch, even with its arms severed from its torso.
"You will never bother Aaron or his people again," I said. I transformed Greed into the black bow and loaded an arrow charged with earth magic. "Let's see how you enjoy an eternity of suffering."
I fired the arrow point-blank between the lich lord's eyes.
The arrow did not falter. It plunged straight through the lich lord, and in the arrow's wake, the monster's body became brittle stone, crackling down from its head through the rest of its gruesome form. The crowned beast didn't even have a chance to cry out before it froze in place.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +3,640,000, Strength +2,560,000, Magic +4,565,000, Spirit +4,346,000, Agility +2,347,000. New skills added: Hallucination (Spell), Magic Boost (High), Spirit Boost (High).

The dreaded lich lord had been reduced to nothing more than a terrifying statue with a hideous visage.
Truthfully, even in death, the lich gazed out with such a terrifying snarl that I was sure that even if I'd put the statue up for sale, nobody would have bought it for fear of being cursed by its grimace. The lich lord was a fearsome foe.

Directly after that thought came the expected maddening bliss that accompanied devouring a crowned beast. Gluttony tried to wrest control of my body from me. The lich lord's soul was an exquisite dish, richer than rich, *sublime*—unlike any beast I'd yet devoured.

I grit my teeth, but a pained groan escaped my lips. I shifted Greed back into the black sword and gripped the hilt, digging my fingers into the metal, focusing the entirety of my energy on not losing my very consciousness to the violent ecstasy of Gluttony.

In a matter of moments, the insanity passed. I'd successfully fought back the worst of Gluttony. I whispered a quiet thanks to the training I'd endured to control my Skill of Mortal Sin. If I could bear eating a soul as powerful as the lich lord's, then I was confident I could handle even more formidable foes. Regardless of my current abilities, complete control was still a long way away: the stress of enduring Gluttony's fit of ecstasy had caused bloody tears to leak from the corners of my eyes.

I used the glassy reflection of the obsidian blade of the black sword to wipe the blood from my face. I stared into the eyes of my reflection. They'd returned to their normal black. Gluttony's hunger was satisfied.

I took another moment to catch my breath before I turned back to Aaron. The light of the souls drifting around him slowly dimmed. He watched them fade, and I felt that part of him was sad to see them go, even as voiceless spirits.

"Wait for me," he said, to the ebbing lights, to the empty hall. "When I finish what I have to do, I'll be with you once more."

The two souls vanished into the darkness, as though Aaron's words gave them the confidence they needed to move on. The only living presence remaining in the castle was Aaron and myself. Silence fell upon us, so engulfing that it was hard to imagine a vicious battle had taken place mere moments ago.

Aaron glanced over at me. With a slightly awkward, almost embarrassed look on his face, he broke the silence. "Fate, I'm very sorry to trouble you further, but…may I ask another favor of you?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"I want to start over in Hausen. I promised my family I would. But numerous monsters have made a home of the city while I've been gone. Will you help me clear them out?"

Aaron wanted to rebuild his estate, but before he could begin that considerable undertaking, he needed to make it safe. That meant combing through the entire city to hunt down every last skeleton lurking in the back alleys, perched on the roofs, and hiding in the buildings. That could take all night…or, given the size of the city, perhaps another entire day from dawn until dusk.

Even given the size of the task, it wasn't really a question. If my master asked me for help, then, as his student, I was duty-bound to lend a hand.

"I'm here," I said. "And besides, I could do with a little more practice."

“Still good to go, eh?” Aaron said, his old cheer returning. “How about you lead the strike this time?”
“Works for me. You should probably take it easy, anyway, since you’ve got that injury.”
Aaron laughed. “Hah! This? ’Tis but a scratch!”
The old knight was nothing if not tough, but still, I didn’t want him to overdo it. After all, as far as I knew, no magic could heal another person’s wounds and injuries. I knew if I tried to stop Aaron, he simply wouldn’t listen. So rather than keep him out of the fray, I’d just have to put my own Health Regen to good use and do my best.
“Well,” I said, “shall we take a short break and then get to it?”
“No. We start immediately.”
“What?!”
Never mind. Aaron was too tough for his own good. All his talk of being an old man in his twilight years was impossible to believe. But before I could voice any of my thoughts, Aaron let out a startled yelp.
“Aaron! What’s wrong?!”
Aaron chuckled to himself, his eyes glimmering with surprise. “I can’t believe it…!” he muttered. “It’s possible. It’s really possible…”
I stood there, waiting for him to clarify, unsure of what had just happened.
“Looks like even an old dog like me really can learn some new tricks! Fate, I’ve reached my limit break. I’ve leveled up!”
“Whoa. Seriously?”
“Yes. There are still new levels for me to reach!”
Just like skills, every person was born with a maximum level, or “level cap.” Once this level cap was reached, further leveling up was impossible. Additionally, as people aged and their bodies deteriorated, they reached a point where their level stopped increasing no matter how many monsters they felled in battle. The rare act of breaking through this level barrier was known as the “limit break.” According to Aaron, a limit break allowed a person to grow ten times beyond their current level. Even in legends, only a very small number of adventurers had ever reached their limit break. Since so few examples of the phenomenon were recorded, Aaron told me that he had no idea why he’d reached it now.
“Perhaps,” he said, “it’s the influence of strength, Fate. Perhaps by fighting alongside you, and coming in touch with your untapped inner powers, I unlocked my limit break.”
“My inner powers?”
The only inner power I could think of was Gluttony. Was it really possible that Gluttony was the reason Aaron had reached his limit break? I had no way of knowing. I’d never fought beside anyone else.
“He’s not wrong. There is a kind of…influence that occurs when people fight alongside a person whose skills defy the natural order of the gods,” said Greed. “The influence does not reach everyone, only those who are truly

accepted by the bearers of the Skills of Mortal Sin. Good or bad, this is how a limit break is reached."
"Why didn't you tell me any of this earlier?"
"Because it's not usually relevant now, is it? I suspect the legends of past limit breaks likely hide a Skill of Mortal Sin somewhere in their shadows."
As Greed and I muttered at each other, Aaron was giddy with excitement at his new level and its accompanying new possibilities.
"Fate," he cried, "this is not the time to be talking to yourself! It's time to clean out the skeletons from the dusty old closets they've made home! Who knows, maybe we'll see another level up on the way."
"You seem…excited."
"That's because I've got so much to look forward to! Let's go!" Aaron bounded out of the castle.
"Aaron," I called in hurried pursuit. "Wait. We've got one major problem!"
He didn't even slow down. "Problem?"
"Myne is going to be blind with rage if we're late."
"Ah, I see… How about a compromise, then? What if we raise her reward for protecting the village to a hundred gold? Surely that will satisfy a girl with an eye for coin!"
Aaron was smart. He'd only talked with Myne a few times, but he'd already pinpointed her weakness. She'd be only too happy to forgive our late return if double the gold accompanied it. I could already see the joy in her eyes as she counted the coins.
Now that we had that issue settled, we could fight to our hearts' content! Using the stats I'd absorbed from the lich lord, I bounded past Aaron and retook the lead.
"Hey," I called back, "I thought you said you'd leave the lead to me! Shouldn't you try acting your age? Leave some scraps for the youngsters!"
"Hm, I did say that, didn't I? But it's been a long time. I'm in the mood to run a little rampant!"
Aaron's jaunty smile was contagious. I found myself grinning as well. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"
We'd arrived at the same understanding: a hunting competition. As we sprang into battle, our voices cried out in unison. "It's on!"
It was time to take Hausen back from the death that had smothered it for so long. At this rate, we'd clear out the city well ahead of schedule.

Chapter 22:
Dignity Regained

BLOW BY BLOW, Hausen became a city free from monsters. There was just a little farther to go. Aaron and I had successfully cleared the southern, eastern, and northern districts of their skeleton denizens, and we now fought through the monsters of the western district. To get to this spot, we had carved through more than a thousand skeletons. In doing so, we'd accumulated a vast amount of hate. This was all new territory for me. I'd never before hunted such a profound number of monsters without taking so much as a break.

"These skeletons are swarming, Aaron. Is this ever going to end?"

"Yes. Mind you, hunting for this long would normally be extraordinarily dangerous and therefore best avoided. But, with you at my side, we've got nothing to worry about."

As he spoke, Aaron's golden sword—charged with holy energy—chopped five skeleton knights into pieces as they leapt toward him. This was the kind of maneuver that made me think that, despite his words, he'd have been perfectly fine without me. He practically overflowed with energy.

I figured we'd been fighting for around fifteen hours, and that was if I began my count after we'd defeated the lich lord. No rest, no sleep. Just battle. I examined the height and position of the sun to double-check my estimate, and I realized we'd actually been fighting for as long as eighteen hours, through the night and into the next afternoon. The relentless hunting had skewed my perception of time. I had a feeling that, at this point, sleep would only bring dreams of battling skeletons.

Surprisingly, my Gluttony seemed unimpressed with the feast. I got the feeling it wanted a little more variety in the menu.

"Fate, once we've cleared out this area, we're finished. Can you keep going?" Aaron asked.

"Of course!"

I dodged a sudden rain of arrows, quickly transformed Greed into the black bow, and fired back at the archers. Earth magic coated all my arrows. My marksmanship had improved by leaps and bounds through the course of this battle. The lessons I'd learned from Aaron about the basics of combat had lent themselves to my abilities.

I also had a living example of unparalleled combat experience right before my eyes. Just watching Aaron provided me with more lessons. Fighting alongside him was like reading a textbook in motion. While I watched him at work, the skeletons became textbook exercises upon which I could try what I had just observed.

I leapt into the air, twisting myself to dodge another volley of incoming arrows. As I did so, I released my own arrows while my body was still in

flight. A few of my shots headed off the mark. Since the arrows came from the black bow, however, they self-corrected in midair and found their targets anyway: the thick skulls of the skeleton archers. A familiar metallic voice rang in my head.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +1,290, Strength +1,440, Magic +1,110, Spirit +1,230, Agility +770.

Yes, I thought, *now* this *is a technique I can use.* Until yesterday I'd considered evasion and attack to be two separate movements, but by watching Aaron I'd discovered a new concept—that I could pull both off at the same time.

I was sure this was the last time Aaron and I would fight together, so I wanted to remember everything he did: how to attack without wasted movement; how to stay focused, yet keenly aware of the enemies surrounding you. I watched Aaron execute his deadly swordplay as I fought my own skirmishes, studying him for techniques that I could make my own. Once Aaron and I parted, I'd be left to my own devices once more. I needed to cram in as much learning as I could. Greed was a weapon, but he couldn't stand at my side and teach me the finer techniques of wielding his variations. And because of Myne's fickle personality, I couldn't see her teaching me any of the more particular details of adventuring any time soon.

In that sense, I considered Aaron to be both my first and my last teacher.

"I took care of the archers," I said. "Once we finish the knights, that should be everything in the city."

"You've fought with me this whole way, Fate. For that, you have my thanks." Aaron briefly glanced over and smiled. Then, with the holy charge building in his sword, he unleashed the Grand Cross tech-art onto the last few skeletons.

"We're done," he said.

The holy light carved through the ground upon which the skeleton knights lumbered like lightning, bursting on contact into a radiant magical energy that cleansed them all to ash, then air. Nothing was left in the aftermath of the burning charge. After the burst faded, the only light was the ocean of evening stars glimmering above.

"We fought right through into a second evening," said Aaron, looking at the stars himself. "You're going to be late for your departure, Fate. I'm sorry."

"No, I should be thanking you, Aaron. You've taught me so much."

Aaron laughed. "I don't think I taught you anything special. Besides, there's nothing left for me to impart, Fate."

"But…we've barely even started!"

"In the end, it's all swordsmanship," Aaron said, his voice slipping naturally back into a teacherly tone. "There are clear limits to how much we can polish your stances and form. From now on, what matters most is how you

take those basic stances and refine them into your own art. You've far surpassed my expectations already—I can tell you're making them your own."

I had never imagined the Blade of Light himself would praise me with these words…but at the same time, I felt like Aaron was pushing me away. "I still have so far to go, Aaron… Watching you, I feel like I've only just begun to understand combat tactics—how to *fight*."

Aaron placed his left hand on my head gently, a deep kindness in his eyes. "No, Fate. You've learned enough from me. You are special—you wield a weapon that changes form. If I continued to teach you swordsmanship, your fighting style would skew too heavily toward that one form. You aren't meant for that. You must fight as you feel, Fate, without the limitations of others. I believe that if you do, you will arrive at a style to call uniquely your own."

That…was a good point. So far, Greed had three forms: the sword, the bow, and the scythe. And Greed had hinted that we would continue to unlock others. To focus on only one weapon style would be the wrong approach. So, to make my own style meant… "You mean, I need to develop a style that blends all the weapon's forms into one?"

"Exactly. And that, I cannot teach you. As the Blade of Light, all I've ever known is the way of the sword." Aaron lifted his hand from my head.

By meeting and fighting alongside Aaron, I felt like I had come to understand what battle truly was. But the longer I walked this path, the more I realized how *long* it was. *Greed really is an amazing weapon,* I thought. But there was no way I could tell him that. It'd go straight to his head.

"You called for me?" The black sword's question sprang out of nowhere.

"Nobody called for you, Greed," I muttered.

"How strange. Yet here I am, so certain you just called my name."

I definitely needed to keep an eye on Greed's uncanny intuition.

Meanwhile, Aaron placed his holy sword in its sheath and turned to the castle. "Well, let's grab that old gold out of the coffers and head back to the village. We probably don't want to be much later than we already are, right?"

"Nope! I have a feeling Myne's fuming."

"In that case, let's be quick about this!"

We ran through the now empty streets of the city, and with our footsteps echoing on the worn cobblestones, I hoped that someday Hausen would return to being the lively place it once had been.

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We took the gold from the castle treasury and headed straight back to the village, where—as expected—Myne waited, steaming mad. Her scarlet eyes were an intense, bright red that brought to mind an explosive inferno.

“You said you would be back yesterday! Yet here you are, a whole day late! Explain yourselves! Now!”
“W-well, I mean, we had such great momentum going after we killed the lich lord,” I stammered. “We kind of thought maybe we’d…just go ahead and clear out the whole city, you know…?”
“It was my idea,” said Aaron humbly. “The fault is mine.”
“Children, the both of you!” Myne snarled. “Don’t you know how to keep your word?!”
I felt awkwardly helpless, standing there being berated by someone who was, by all appearances, a petite young woman. Even Aaron, who usually appeared so staunchly courageous, wilted before this maiden’s piercing glare. Then again, the Aaron I’d seen after he reached his limit break had been basically a child with a new toy. Perhaps here, standing before Myne, he was reflecting on his actions with a child’s shame.
“Hey, Aaron,” I whispered, motioning with my hand. “Hurry up and give her the bag.”
“Ah, of course!” Aaron brightened. “Myne, we brought these back for you. They’re a small token of thanks for protecting the village while we were away.”
“A token, you say?” asked Myne. Her expression transformed when Aaron held out a fat bag of gold. She snatched it from him. “Oooooh.”
The bag held double the fifty coins she expected. With the near overflowing bag in her hand, her rage vanished. Myne looked like happiness personified. Surprise and joy replaced her wrath as she opened and closed the bag, admiring her coins and exclaiming “Oooooh!” each time she saw them.
“Looks like we’re in the clear,” I said to Aaron.
“Indeed. We’re lucky we know her weakness for coin. In any case, let’s have something to eat and get some rest. To be honest, I’m exhausted.”
“You and me both.”
The villagers had already prepared food for Aaron’s return. A wonderfully enticing scent wafted from his house. Myne had told them about Aaron setting out to put an end to the lich lord, and the villagers had wanted to support his efforts as best they could. That support was the food that now waited for us. Myne said that when Aaron failed to return the day before, the villagers had been beside themselves with worry. The only reason they weren’t out to greet Aaron right now was because of the lateness of the hour. Aaron decided it was better not to wake them. Instead, he would inform them of his safe return at first light.
“In any case, let’s head inside, shall we?” said Aaron, ushering us into his home. “The night isn’t getting any younger. Hah!”
Myne was still utterly engrossed in her bag of coins, so I took her hand and gently led her into Aaron’s house. Inside, I ate my fill of the villagers’ welcoming banquet, then sank to the floor, ready to sleep like a rock. I didn’t even have the energy to ask Myne not to use my stomach as her pillow.

On the morning of our departure, Aaron and the villagers came to see us off as we readied our newly repaired cart. Many villagers thanked me profusely. It turned out that most of the monsters that regularly attacked the village rolled in from Hausen, so the villagers considered my going with Aaron to clear the city out a great service. It wasn't just me; Myne was also showered with gratitude for protecting the village from about thirty monsters while Aaron had stepped away.

"Fate," Aaron said, that same gentle kindness in his eyes, "when you finish what you need to do in Galia, make sure you return here. I have something important to tell you."

"Something important?"

"Indeed. Very important. We'll talk about it upon your return, so be sure you survive and come back safe!" With that, Aaron reached toward me. "Until we meet again."

I grasped his rugged, battle-worn hand in my own and nodded. "Until then." I decided then that if I survived the ordeals of Galia, I would indeed return. I'd only spent four days with Aaron, and there was still so much I wanted to learn and share.

"Fate, it's time to go," Myne said, a little bored and not afraid to show it.

"Right, okay," I said. "Aaron, everyone, thank you for everything. Until next time!"

I hopped aboard the cart, then popped my head out the window as we rattled down the road. I waved back to everyone as they faded away into the distance, and I felt a tinge of sadness at having to say goodbye.

Aaron and his villagers would go to work rebuilding Hausen. It would once again be an estate bustling with life. For me, a person who had never before had a thought of what awaited me after Galia, this future had become one I looked forward to.

Chapter 23:
Myne's Request

OUR CART MADE STEADY PROGRESS, and we arrived at one of the last towns before Galia. All that remained between us and Galia after this place was the fortified town that defended the border, to which we were headed. That was likely where Lady Roxy's troops would soon be stationed.

"Thank you for everything," I said to our driver.

"No, no, thank you! You made me a lot of money. I'm only sorry I can't take you any farther; it's just too dangerous past this point. I can't risk the potential damage to my cart."

"This is more than far enough," I said, handing him his promised fifteen gold.

The driver was not an adventurer; however, he told us that army caravans arrived in this town periodically to ferry profit-seeking adventurers to and from the border. Those caravans were our best bet for getting there safely. For his part, the driver intended to search for adventurers heading home, so he could make some money and ensure protection for himself and his vehicle. He didn't plan to stay long if he could help it.

"Myne, let's go," I said.

"Right behind you."

The town we walked through had been built purely to bolster support for the border, and a wide variety of supplies arrived daily that were then delivered to the front lines. The place was also packed with adventurers, more than I'd ever seen anywhere near Seifort. Every one of them was there for monster hunting.

There was never a shortage of hunting jobs so close to Galia, so this town was an excellent place to make money. The rewards for successful hunts were phenomenal. For experienced adventurers, this town was probably next to heaven. At the same time, the area was prone to stampedes of rampaging monsters, so this heaven was defined by a constant state of danger.

There were two types of monster stampede: small and large scale. Holy knights sent here from Seifort were in charge of subduing large-scale stampedes, colloquially referred to as "death parades." These comprised tens of thousands of monsters, which would wipe out ordinary hunting parties in a gruesome instant.

Small-scale stampedes, if you could call them small, were made up of a few hundred monsters. Experienced adventurers often handled these, gathering into giant parties of hundreds to face down the horde. They were sometimes led by former holy knights, men and women who had been broken by the constant petty power struggles in the kingdom and eventually washed up in

this town. Perhaps they dreamed of making names for themselves and one day returning to Seifort in glory.
“Where are we going, Fate?” Myne asked.
“Let’s find someplace to eat first. *Somebody’s* been eating all my food supplies.”
“Ah, okay.”
That somebody was Myne, but as usual, she showed not even a tiny hint of remorse. In fact, she looked as if she lived by the logic that my stuff was, by extension, her stuff. That didn’t matter, really. I was getting used to it. As long as she wasn’t angry at me, I didn’t care what she did. Every time I contemplated crossing the line with her, I thought back to the time Myne had snapped and sent a rude holy knight flying through the air, far away, into the great beyond…
What kind of punishment awaited people who made Myne *truly* angry, if that was what you got for a low-level offense? I dreaded to think.
“What are you doing, Fate? Let’s go.” Myne was already marching ahead of me.
“Wait, wait, don’t just go walking off without me…” I nevertheless followed Myne into the shop.
Wait, that smell…it’s meat! It was such a beautiful scent! I didn’t even know I’d started drooling. The shop was filled with the sublime aroma of barbecued meat. The scent alone would go well with ten loaves of bread!
I still had a good amount of money saved from our journey, and recently, all I’d eaten was our stock of traveling preserves. It was definitely time to buy something a little luxurious. I searched for a free seat, but the shop was completely full. A group of adventurers had finished eating, but they were just sitting around shooting the breeze.
Can’t you guys see us here? How about making some space for people who want to eat?!
As I stood there with my unkind thoughts, Myne left my side and went straight up to the chatty adventurers.
“If you’ve finished your meal, leave,” she said, her voice flat and her face expressionless. “People are waiting to eat.”
I had a feeling I knew how the next few seconds would go, and it wouldn’t be pretty. I didn’t want to get wrapped up in it, so I slunk toward the back of the shop to watch the events unfold from a safe distance.
The adventurers clearly did not understand the danger they were in. The most experienced of them waved Myne off. “Take your ugly face and put it somewhere I can’t see, girl! I got no business with kids. Why don’t you go hit up some other boob? Oh wait, you can’t, ’cuz you don’t got none!”
Ooh, you shouldn’t have said that. I winced. “Don’t treat Myne like a child” was on page two of my instruction manual *How to Handle Wrath: An Explanatory Guide to Myne*. I was *not* going to take responsibility for his actions.

Just like that, the once festive atmosphere was destroyed in an abrupt outbreak of violence.

Ooh. Oof. That looks like it hurts, I thought. Ugh, that too…ouch. Myne, go easy on them, go easy… That part of the body doesn't bend that way. Oh dear. Are you really going to do that, too? You must be joking. Oh. Not joking. Clearly not joking. That looks bad. That looks so bad…

Even just watching the carnage from my spot at the back wall, I was drenched in a cold sweat. As I expected: flat-chested was a *very* dangerous insult to throw around. So I opened the *How to Handle Wrath: An Explanatory Guide to Myne* instruction manual in my head and wrote a new entry.

All eight of the experienced adventurers ended up piled atop one another. Their eyes were rolled back into their heads and they frothed at the mouth. In their near comatose condition, they slurred in fear about the wrath of a frightening little demon.

In just a few moments, they'd been handed a traumatic defeat they'd carry the memory of for the rest of their lives. If only they'd thought to measure her power before running their mouths. They'd been caught completely off guard by her cute, youthful appearance.

Myne plonked herself down into one of the newly emptied seats and began placing her order. The waitress listened, writing it down as her legs quivered with terror. The poor woman…

Myne looked over at me, then waved me over. "Fate, quickly. There's a free spot over here."

No, don't call me over now, Myne! They'll all think I'm as scary as you! I thought.

As I took my seat, the waitress cleaned the mess from our table and dashed toward the counter.

"Wait! I haven't ordered yet!" I called after her.

Forcing a glutton like me to wait was pure torture. I wondered whether I'd done something to anger Myne.

"I ordered for the both of us," she said. "I'm kind."

Something in her red eyes searched me for agreement. I'd so looked forward to ordering one of my favorite dishes…but I supposed it *was* nice of her to consider me when she ordered, even if she'd kind of forced the whole situation on me.

In any case, I had two options here, and only one was a good idea. "Yeah, you are kind," I said. "Thanks, Myne."

"Eh…" Myne turned away from me.

Apparently, she wasn't used to people actually giving her compliments. When I thought about it, she always carried herself without a care for anyone other than herself. She was feared, but never complimented. Perhaps she was a little more thoughtful toward me than other people because of my Skill of Mortal Sin…?

When our food arrived, it was a huge plate bearing an even huger hunk of roasted meat. But…just one. Where was my food? I felt like I was going to cry.
“We share this,” Myne said.
“Oh, so that’s what you had in mind. But why are you doing all this?”
Usually we ordered separately. What reason did Myne have for wanting to split this particular meal? Did it mean she wanted us to get along better? If so, that would mean Myne sometimes thought like a regular person. I felt a little relieved having figured this out.
Then Myne went and opened her mouth. “It’s a pre-battle ritual,” she said. “You share food with partners before departing for a hunt. It’s a tradition from long ago.”
“Oh, okay… Wait. What did you just say?”
“We’re going to eat this together, and then we’re going to hunt a fearsome, powerful monster. Then you will pay me back what you owe me.”
Ah. It was finally time to repay Myne for her favor. I’d arrived just a short way from the sentinel city Lady Roxy would be stationed at, and now I was stuck on a detour, hunting what *Myne* of all people called a fearsome, powerful monster. I suddenly doubted that she was really as kind as she said. But I’d promised; I had to help her.
I was apprehensive about the upcoming battle, but also curious, and in many ways excited. For a long time now, I’d wanted to fight beside another warrior with a Skill of Mortal Sin. Funnily enough, I’d ended up in a position where I couldn’t avoid it. In a way, Myne was forcing this opportunity on me too.
I took a piece of tender, barbecued meat that Myne cut from the huge slab and ate heartily. Eat together, fight together. That was our agreement.

Chapter 24:
The Green Demi-Humans

AFTER OUR MEAL, Myne and I headed toward the south gate, our next stop between town and wherever I was supposed to pay back the debt I owed. The path was filled with shops of various kinds, from foodstuffs to accessories. Streams of money passed through this town, so it was only natural that the shopping district was full of all manner of adventuring gear.
The first thing on my supply list for hunting in Galia was food. I stopped by a stall to pick up my usual stock of jerky and dried fruit, and to my surprise, I found Myne doing exactly the same thing. That was quite out of the ordinary; usually, she simply took what she needed from *my* supplies.
"What's up?" I asked. "This isn't like you at all."
"A pity, but you're wrong. I know the importance of preparing for a trip into Galia. It's a completely different world over there. You can't restock whenever you like."
A completely different world… If someone as strong as Myne thought so, then it had to be true. That left me with a predicament: I felt as if I ought to buy more food than usual, but I knew that if I bought too much, my supplies would get in the way while I fought. I decided to wait and see how much Myne purchased. She was the experienced one here, after all.
"Wow, you're buying quite a lot," I said.
"Galia is a vast country," Myne replied, "and supplies are not easy to come by. You have to stock up. If it comes down to it, you leave your supplies somewhere while you fight."
"You just leave them? On the ground? They won't get stolen or eaten by monsters?"
"You kill them before they get the chance."
"That plan is just so very…you."
There was a hint of swagger in the smile Myne returned. I realized that she actually loved these little compliments. I liked the way her expression subtly shifted with each word of praise.
I would have kept it up, but I was distracted by a stall next to us, lined with precious stones. Ruby, citrine, emerald, sapphire—there were various gemstones, but my eyes caught on a particular blue jewel that stood out. Its hue would always have special meaning to me, because it was the same color as the jewel I had given to Lady Roxy to thank her for all her help back at Seifort.
I lifted the jewel and examined it more closely. Was Lady Roxy still wearing that jewel around her neck in the pendant she'd made? I hoped so.
What are you doing now, Lady Roxy? I wondered. I'd asked around town earlier and learned that we'd arrived before her. Since the holy knight army

was still a ways out, I couldn’t get information on her troops or their current status.
Still, I trusted that she was steadily approaching Galia. Lady Roxy was strong-willed and steadfast. There was nothing for me to worry about on her behalf. Instead, I needed to focus on my own task: growing stronger. That was the most I could do for her right now. I returned the blue jewel to its place in the stall and moved on.
Once we finished shopping for supplies, Myne and I left through the town gate and headed directly south.
“Exactly where are we going, anyway?” I asked.
The rugged landscape stretched on without a break, far into the horizon. If we continued in this direction, we’d cross the border into Galia. I had a bad feeling about that, which was why I prodded Myne for more information. She characteristically ignored me and continued walking in silence.
Eventually, the sun began to set, stretching evening shadows across the land. Myne’s feet marched ever onward. When I looked east, I saw yellow lights in the distance. Those must have come from the sentinel city—the front line of the constant battle between the invasive flood of monsters from Galia and the people who attempted to stop them. The same place Lady Roxy would be stationed for the next three years.
The sentinel city was where I wanted to be, not here, marching into the unknown. As my thoughts drifted toward it, Myne’s elbow jabbed my side and brought me straight back to reality.
“No more distractions,” she said. “Focus.”
“Sorry,” I mumbled.
Myne pointed into the distance. “The Galian region starts there. Prepare yourself.”
There was no clear line or border marking in the direction Myne pointed. However, I made out the entrance to Galia by the signs of battle. Great cracks ran along the earth, and sections of land had crumbled or caved in completely. I followed Myne, and in that way, I took my first step into Galia.
Huh?! Did…did the air just change?!
My skin went cold, and the scent of blood and death drifted toward me on the wind. Was it possible for the world to change so drastically with just a single step?! I stepped backward into the clean air, inhaled deeply, and then took another step forward. As before, the atmosphere itself changed.
Something separated Galia from the Kingdom of Seifort. Something invisible to the human eye, but nonetheless, a schism that cleaved the two countries into different worlds.
“Come on, Fate. Let’s go.” A hint of impatience flickered in Myne’s voice as she goaded me on.
I called out to assure her that I was on my way and hurried to catch up. My stomach growled. Damn it, why would Gluttony bother me so quickly? I’m working so hard to keep it under control—and now, all of a sudden, this?

“Look to the southern skies, Fate. Far off in the distance,” said Greed. “That’s what your Gluttony is responding to.”
“Is that…is that what I think it is?”
“It is. The Heavenly Calamity.”
Bathing in the light of the setting sun, a white dragon soared majestically through the sky, so gigantic in form that it could have been mistaken for a cloud. The Divine Dragon of Galia. The reason Lady Roxy had been called. *The sheer size of it…it’s insane*. The overwhelming sense of scope made me dizzy, and I fell to my knees as I stared at the dragon from afar. For the Heavenly Calamity to give off the impression of immensity it did from this distance meant that, up close, compared to that creature, I would be no larger than a grain of wheat. I was desperate to use Identify on it, but that was impossible from so far away.
“Are you okay?” Myne asked, reaching a hand out to steady me.
“I…I feel better now.”
As the Heavenly Calamity disappeared over the horizon, the hungry pulsing of my Gluttony began to subside. I had never imagined it would respond so aggressively to the Divine Dragon. But as Gluttony grew in strength, so too did its appetite for new meals. This…was going to be trouble.
“You’re a long way from facing down a monster of that class,” Myne warned. “I saw your hunger.”
I laughed, wiping the sweat from my brow. “Yeah, you’re not wrong.”
The Heavenly Calamity was even greater than the legends I’d heard. It appeared unbelievably powerful, which meant its name was no mere exaggeration. I knew deep in my heart that, at some point, I’d have to face it. How far could I get in a battle like that? I couldn’t even begin to imagine.
On impulse, I took stock of my current stats with Identify.

Fate Graphite, Lv 1
Vitality: 12,256,101
Strength: 11,234,601
Magic: 12,312,201
Spirit: 11,284,401
Agility: 13,378,001
Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, Night Vision, Brawl, Marksmanship, Holy Sword Technique, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Bow Technique, Fireball (Spell), Sandstorm (Spell), Hallucination (Spell), Strength Boost (Low), Strength Boost (Medium), Strength Boost (High), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Magic Boost (High), Spirit Boost (Medium), Spirit Boost (High), Agility Boost (Low), Agility Boost (Medium), Health Regen, Fire Resistance

These were the sum of my stats and skills, and even combined, I didn’t dream that they could scratch the might of the Heavenly Calamity. I could

not fathom the strength I would need. I watched in awe as the Divine Dragon vanished over the horizon.
“Fate, the first place you should aim for is the Domain of E.”
Myne’s words caught me off guard. “The Domain of E?”
“Why’d she have to go and bring that up?” said Greed, annoyed. “You’re not ready for that.”
“I don’t understand, Greed. What do you mean?”
“The mighty Greed cares not for such mundanities.”
With that, Greed dropped into another sullen silence. I took my hand off the black sword’s hilt and sighed. I desperately wanted to know, so why wouldn’t he just tell me?!
Fortunately, Myne was still talking. “The Domain of E is the area in which the Heavenly Calamity resides. With Gluttony, it’s possible for you to reach its level in a matter of days. But as you are now, Gluttony would consume you entirely in the process.”
“You mean, I’d lose control before I fought the Divine Dragon?”
“That’s right.”
Myne said it lightly, but Greed’s response earlier revealed enough: she was telling the truth. As it stood, I couldn’t reach whatever the Domain of E was, not as myself. And if I couldn’t do that, I couldn’t even think of facing the Heavenly Calamity.
“You said ‘as you are now.’ Does that mean, with time, I can reach the Domain of E and retain myself?” I asked.
“Hm…you could probably get there in ten years.”
Ten years was longer than I’d expected. I didn’t have ten whole years to work with. I had no idea when the Heavenly Calamity would cross the border again, this time wreaking havoc on Lady Roxy and her troops. When that happened, I had to be prepared to go to a place within myself from which I might never return.
“One more thing,” Myne continued. “It’s better not to kill the Heavenly Calamity at all. Better for Seifort, I mean. The divine dragon plays an important role in controlling monster populations. If it should die, an endless horde would descend upon the lands of the kingdom. That’s why I’ve never laid a hand on it.”
“But…”
Even if I reached the Domain of E, I *couldn’t* kill the Heavenly Calamity? What was I supposed to do, then?! It was like my hands were tied. I gripped the handle of the black sword as I thought.
“Worrying about it right now won’t do you any good,” said Greed. “Now that you’re here, you have one task. When it comes time to see this other task through, you will have my help.”
“Greed…”
“But first things first: Myne. Let’s focus on taking care of her business.”
“You’re right.”

It was no use getting lost in worrying about questions that did not yet have answers.
In silence, we continued into Galia.

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Myne and I walked deeper and deeper into the rugged wasteland. Night blanketed the sky, and the stars glimmered between passing clouds above. I took a piece of jerky from my bag, chewing as I followed behind Myne. Just how far were we going?
Myne strolled onward, her heavy black axe resting casually on her shoulders. Despite her easy gait, there was no hint of weakness in her posture. Now that I had learned the basics of battle from Aaron, I saw that Myne was ready to battle at a moment's notice. She was constantly on edge; combat-ready was simply her natural state. She always held perfect form.
While I studied her, Myne suddenly stopped in place and took her black axe in both hands. "Monsters are here, Fate. A small-scale stampede."
"Huh? Where?"
Myne pointed southeast. She'd picked up their movements from afar, but even with my Night Vision, I couldn't see anything. She must have sensed the monsters' energy.
After a minute of squinting at the horizon, I saw the monsters, along with the rolling clouds of dust their charge kicked up. There must have been about two hundred—green monsters that stood on two legs, with snarling, pig-like faces. They were much brawnier and bulkier than goblins, and they were about half again my height.
I'd have to wait until they came into range before I used Identify. "Myne, is there any way to avoid the stampede?"
"No. The place we need to go is directly past them. I don't want anything getting in our way while we're there, so we'll kill them before we move on."
I unsheathed Greed. "Okay. I was getting kind of hungry anyway."
"Those ugly pigs are the most common monster here in Galia. They're called orcs. They attack with weapons they craft themselves from rocks. They're clever, so fight them like you would a person."
"You mean, they'll work together to attack us?"
"Right. As long as you haven't already forgotten what Aaron taught you, I expect you'll have no trouble."
If these two hundred orcs belonged to an army, they'd be a whole squadron. As they approached, I saw that not all their weapons were the same. They'd crafted a variety, from shields, swords, and spears to bows and wands. Each orc seemed to have its own weapon preferences. Although my stats towered above theirs, they'd overwhelm me if I wasn't mindful of their strategies, and I'd be a goner. I understood now why Myne said to treat them like human opponents.

The orc squadron became aware of our presence and stopped a short distance from us. The blue orcs at the back of the squadron raised their voices, issuing commands. In the next instant, the orcs unleashed a hail of arrows and magic upon us.
“Huh?!”
I hurriedly transformed Greed into the black scythe and dodged the falling arrows, cutting down the raining flame. The orcs must have been using Fireball spells. I had the Fire Resistance skill, but when possible, I still didn’t want to get hit.
The orcs’ arrows and fireballs hurtled down without pause. I was trapped simply defending myself. I couldn’t move, so I couldn’t get close to the orcs. Did they plan to continue this attack and wait until we tired so they could finish us off? If so, that was bad news. There were a lot more of them than of us. I couldn’t let them pull us into a battle of attrition.
The orcs had taken command of the pace of battle. They had me stuck in place. I heard a sigh.
“A simple squadron of orcs, and you get yourself pinned down,” said Myne. “This does not inspire much confidence for the battle ahead, Fate.”
“Oh, yeah? Well, do you have any bright ideas?”
Myne wasn’t any different from me: she was on the defensive, dodging projectiles. I was just about to point that out when she suddenly gouged an enormous chunk from the earth in front of her with the black axe.
“Whoa!”
A huge dust cloud formed in the air from the massive stone Myne had carved from the ground, clouding our vision completely. What the hell was she doing?! We couldn’t see the arrows or fireballs anymore. One wrong move, and we’d be scorched toast. What if the orcs attacked from the dust cloud?!
Out of the dust, however, Myne grabbed my hand. She pulled me along as she darted to the side.
“If you keep standing there like an idiot, we’ll lose the tactical advantage I created. Circle around and attack them from the flank! Try to be useful.”
“I see!” I said. I wanted to pay attention to Myne’s tactics, like Aaron had.
“There’s no place to hide, so you just made one. That’s so you!”
Myne released my hand and looked a little embarrassed. “It was…it was nothing special, really…”
Now, it was my turn to show off a little. I transformed Greed into the black sword and cut a rift into the earth, kicking up my own pillar of dust. Next to me, Myne once again did the same. Between our efforts, the orcs soon lost sight of us, and I heard their restless growls within the dust storm.
It was time for our counterattack.

Chapter 25:
The Dance of the Black Axe

USING THEIR CONFUSION and the cover of the dust, we broke in toward the orcs' right flank.

I wasn't about to let Myne take the orcs all by herself. I dove into the squadron with my sword held in a middle guard, protecting my chest. That way, it was poised to deflect missiles. The orcs would have a hard time using distance attacks without risking deadly friendly fire. If they really were as smart as humans, they'd know better than to take that risk.

As I expected, the back-line orcs tried to retreat, while those wielding swords and spears attempted to block my path. Compared to Aaron, though, the orcs were no more worthy opponents than a gaggle of babies. I didn't stop for an instant. Black sword in hand, I took down thirty orcs in seconds.

Gluttony skill activated. Total stat increase: Vitality +156,800, Strength +153,600, Magic +121,600, Spirit +128,000, Agility +121,600. New skills added: Spear Technique, Magic Boost (Low), Magic Boost (Medium), Spirit Boost (Low).

I got fewer skills from the orcs than I expected, probably because they carried a bunch I already had. All the same, in terms of stats, they were quite delicious. Each orc had around four thousand stat points across the board.

Gluttony was blissful as it savored the new dish I'd just fed it. This was completely different from my goblin hunts. In the grasslands, all Gluttony had seemed to do was grumble and moan about the low-quality trash I guzzled down. Considering the souls of orcs were a few hundred times more nourishing, stat-wise, that made sense. I would keep Gluttony happily full of these orcs, preparing for the fearsome enemy we were out here to slay.

The black sword snapped right and left and right again as I worked tirelessly, slaughtering the orcs around me without hesitation. The metallic voice rang in my head as I finished off victim number seventy. We'd estimated a total of two hundred in the squadron, so if we shared them evenly between us, then I needed another thirty or so to make my quota.

How is Myne doing, anyway? I thought, as quivering pieces of chopped orc rained down around me. Unless Galia was prone to weird weather that included showers of gore, the carnage could only mean one thing.

I glanced over at where Myne stood. She was fighting in a style I recognized from the last time I'd seen it, using the same move she had used to launch that holy knight into the sky and far, far away. With each swing of her black axe, she sent another orc flying into the distance to its death. It was a showy technique, with big, bold movements, but efficient. Not a wasted

action among her strikes. With as little motion as was required, she sent orc after orc to its doom, her movements as smooth and flowing as a dancer's. It was tremendously pleasing to watch.

I wonder if I can do that?

I tried to mimic her movements myself, but I was met by Greed's raucous laughter. "Goodness gracious, Fate. You're the worst dancer I've ever seen! And, boy, let me tell you—I've been around for a while!"

"Shut up, Greed. I think it's more like this…"

"Oh, no. You are horrible. Simply awful. Didn't Aaron already teach you how to fight? Myne was born with her talents. They're hardwired into her. You can copy her all you want, but you'll never master her art."

Natural-born talents. That sounded so cool. I wanted one too! But if that strength and grace really were things she'd been born with, then they were clearly out of my reach.

I continued watching Myne as I sliced through the orcs attacking me. There was something else about the way she fought—something instinctual. It was as though she didn't think about her movements at all, her body acting on its own before she became aware of the reason. With enough experience fighting in Galia, that seemed like an ability I could develop too. Watching other adventurers, I realized, was a bountiful resource all its own.

Myne noticed my gaze, and a hint of a smile crossed her face before she launched an orc straight at me. Its corpse almost collided with me. I got the message loud and clear, though. *Stop gawking, and take care of your own share already!*
All right, all right, I'm fighting, I'm fighting, I thought. It's okay just to take a short glance, isn't it?
Despite Myne's warning, I tried to keep an eye on her. After all, this was my first time really seeing her in battle. I wanted to learn as much as I could. That is, until she launched another three orcs at me. I decided maybe it was better to focus on my own side before she launched the next ten. Ten would be pushing it.
We took down the remaining orcs in a frenzy of blood. They fell one after another, their final words little more than ugly death snorts. All that remained was the final blue-skinned orc in charge of the squadron.
I could already hear the monster's goodbye snort as I analyzed it with Identify.

High Orc Leader, Lv 45
Vitality: 203,400
Strength: 217,500
Magic: 175,300
Spirit: 154,300
Agility: 168,400
Skills: Strength Overload, Strength Boost (High), Vitality Boost (High)

This high orc was quite the tasty stat treat. It wasn't a crowned beast, but if these kinds of stats were common among monsters in Galia, then everything I'd heard was true. The monsters of Galia were truly a rank above anything outside the region.
I was curious about Strength Overload, so I used Identify to learn more.

Strength Overload: Doubles the user's Strength stat for a set period of time. After use, Strength stat drops to ten percent of its total. Recovery takes one day.

Huh. A stat-boosting skill. Doubling my strength could really come in handy, too. Still, the danger of leaving my strength at a measly ten percent for a whole day made it risky. With that in mind, Strength Overload would be like an ace up my sleeve—something useful for getting me out of a pinch. I'd enjoy making the skill my own, and I intended to feast upon the high orc leader, who seemed just as ready to fight to the death.

As I finished sizing the monster up, it erupted into a death snort. Myne jumped in from the side and launched the beast far into the distance. However you sliced it, that orc was dead on impact.
“Hey!” I shouted. “That monster was mine! Damn it. I was really looking forward to getting Strength Overload…”
“You’ll find orcs all over Galia. Just kill another one. But if you ask me, Strength Overload is a trash skill anyway.”
“But it literally doubles your strength!”
“And look at the risk you have to take for it. Like I said: Trash. Skill.”
Is she really saying that about a skill that doubles your strength? I couldn’t believe it.
I was still fuming as Myne sighed, dropped her axe, and flopped down to take a break. The axe hit the ground with a deafening roar, sinking into the surrounding earth and caving it in to make a small crater around her.
What the hell?! Just how heavy is that axe, anyway?!
I knew the black axe could change weight, but I had never expected its mass could grow to such a crazy extent. I watched in disbelief as Myne gently patted and whispered to her weapon. “You did a great job, Sloth. A really great job. Keep it up.”
Keep it up? Does she mean…get heavier? That has to be what she’s talking about.
Myne pointed to the spot next to her. “Fate, sit. Rest. Quickly now.”
“But I’m not even tired,” I said.
“After a battle, you always rest. This is important!”
“Hey, wha…ouch!”
Myne gripped my hand and pulled me to the ground next to her.
“You’re always so forceful,” I grumbled, rubbing my hand.
“Thank you. It’s nothing, really.”
“It wasn’t a compliment!”
“Oh? What a pity.”
“Do you even really mean *that*?!”
“Not really.”
There it was, the vague, awkward personality I’d grown used to. We sat on the ground and, for a time, stared up at the stars together. We had nothing else to talk about, so we listened to the night insects chirp as the orc blood cooled around us. When she had rested long enough, Myne stood and pulled her black axe from the small crater it had created.
Just how much farther does she intend for us to walk? I wondered.
“Not much farther now,” Myne said as if reading my mind. “Well, assuming it hasn’t moved.”
“It…?” I asked.
“It is what it is.”
What?! That isn’t an answer! Surely the black sword can help me out, I thought. “Hey, Greed, what’s this ‘it’ Myne’s talking about?”
Greed grunted. “It is what it is.”

Damn it, not you too! Both of you, stop playing around, and give me an honest answer!

I'd just have to walk on to see *it* for myself. Thus, we continued deeper and deeper into the wilds of Galia.

Chapter 26:
The Village of Oblivion

AFTER A FEW MORE BATTLES with wandering orcs, we arrived at the ruins of a village. Little remained of the place, save for piles of rubble and the bare frames of what had once been houses. So much time had passed since its construction that, at first glance, the buildings looked like mountains of dirt. Was this where Myne's so-called fearsome enemy resided? It didn't look like much.

As Myne walked through the village, she turned back to speak to me. "This village was where I was born," she said. "But I was taken to the imperial capital not long after birth, so I don't have any memories of it. Still, this place is important to me."

"*This* is your hometown?"

That didn't make any sense. By the looks of things, this village had been in ruins for thousands of years. Indeed, if I remembered correctly, the Galians had been wiped out some four millennia ago. If Myne was telling the truth, she had to have been born when the village was still inhabited, even thriving. That would make her…more than four thousand years old.

No way. But she looks so young!

Then I remembered her words to Aaron. *I'm…a spirit who is not allowed death.*

I'd always thought Myne was older than her appearance let on, but I never imagined she could be *four thousand* years old. Like Aaron said, she truly was on an entirely different level from us humans. He and I were practically children to her.

Four thousand years... I'd lived in these lands for around sixteen years myself. When I looked back on my life, that felt like ages. Myne had experienced a lifespan more than two hundred times that length. I definitely understood why you'd lose track of smaller details if you lived that long.

If Greed and Myne were acquainted, that might mean Greed was also in the realm of thousands of years old. The sword had confessed that they'd known each other a long time, and that Myne couldn't give up on what she'd never get back. Was this lost thing what drove her to keep going all these millennia? What could I learn of her if I followed her just a little further? After all, if this—her past, her secrets—intertwined with the Skills of Mortal Sin, I was no mere bystander. This was important to me, too.

"Myne, the monster we have to fight, is it here in this village?"

"Yes. But it's a tough enemy for me to take alone. Therefore, I need your power."

"But…what is it? Is it okay for us to stroll around out in the open like this?"

"It's fine. As for what it is… When you see it, you'll know."

I gathered from that comment that it was not the kind of monster that would take the initiative to engage us. I'd gripped Greed this whole time, waiting for an ambush, but it turned out I didn't need to worry. There still wasn't a single monster in the village. The entire area was so unnervingly quiet that it was terrifying.

At the very center of the ruined village was a massive cemetery, a collection of graves damaged by time and weather. At the center of the cemetery rested an equally massive, mysterious cocoon of pure white. It stood at least ten times my height.

Is that the monster?! Is it okay to casually walk up to it like this?!

On instinct, I drew the black sword from its scabbard.

"No…" Greed muttered, disgust at the edge of his voice. "I can't believe one of these things is still alive."

"Greed, what *is* it?"

"It's a chimera," he said. "Sometimes called a mechangel. They were a test project a long time ago, in Galia's distant past, designed as defense measures for the imperial capital. Funny, though. I could have sworn they were all deactivated."

"Are you saying this cocoon is an ancient weapon…?"

"I'm glad you're paying attention. As you so astutely observed, yes. The chimera is one of the Galian military's biological weapons, made from stitched-together pieces of a whole host of monsters. If you ask me, this is their most horrendous failure."

Most horrendous failure?! I didn't like the sound of that. From what I could see, it was just as quiet inside the cocoon as outside. I almost felt like it was best to leave it as it was. I glanced at Myne, standing by my side.

"That's it. What we came here to defeat," she said. "Are you ready, Fate?"

Well, so much for leaving it alone. The cocoon was huge, and despite Greed's description, I had no idea what was inside it. On top of that, I'd never fought anything quite so *big* before. I didn't have the slightest clue how to approach it in battle without being crushed.

Myne noted my pained grin. "It's still in its larval form," she said. "With your stats, you can take it. The problem is, even when you destroy this monster's body, it won't die until you kill its soul. And that is why I need your Gluttony."

"You need Gluttony to eat the chimera's soul?"

"Yes. Among all the Skills of Mortal Sin, Gluttony commits the deepest sin. You bear the skill most despised by the gods."

Uh…wait. I don't have any bones to pick with the gods. I just happened to be born with Gluttony.

Because of the misfortune of my birth, I had been deserted by the world and the gods who watched over it. I was relegated to an existence in which, no matter how many monsters I defeated, I would never earn Spheres and never level up. Instead, I had to rely solely on my Gluttony to grow stronger. Even then, Gluttony refused to listen to my commands. The single skill I had

been born with was a skill that would consume me in my entirety if I gave it half the chance.
And…what did Myne mean by it being the skill that commited the deepest sin?
“Do you mean that among the Skills of Mortal Sin, Gluttony is the strongest?” I asked.
“Yes,” Myne replied. “It defies the very law of levels the gods created. Before that happens, though, the skill completely consumes its bearer.”
“I know that feeling well. It’s happening even as we speak. So, where does Wrath sit in the rankings, then?”
“Wrath is fourth. Above it are Avarice and Lust. Still, Gluttony stands out so much that all the others are considered about equal.”
Another word for Avarice is… I glanced down at the black sword in my hand.
“Weapons of Mortal Sin depend on their owners,” said Greed. “Rankings mean nothing to us.”
“Greed, are you saying…your power relies on who wields you?”
“Of course I am. Whether I live or die depends on you. Enough talk. Unlock my next level, already!”
If only it were that easy. Even after killing the lich lord, I still didn’t have enough stats to unlock Greed’s third form. If where I now stood wasn’t enough for him, it just went to show that the black sword was even greedier than I thought.
Then again, Greed had said unlocking the levels wasn’t just about stats. The mental strength of the wielder was also important. So perhaps I just didn’t have the requisite battle experience. I had a long way to go before I caught up to a warrior like Aaron.
I sighed and settled my gaze back on the cocoon that towered, gleaming, over us. I checked its stats with Identify.

Chimera Haniel, Lv 1
Vitality: 26,000,000
Strength: 29,000,000
Magic: 24,000,000
Spirit: 28,000,000
Agility: 14,000,000
Skills: ERROR

Whoa. This thing was *strong*. And it was still just a larva? I stumbled back, caught my boot on a gravestone, and fell on my ass in surprise. Outside of Agility, it had more than double my stats in each category. And for some reason, Identify couldn’t get a clear reading on the monster’s skills. This whole thing seemed like a recipe for getting caught flat-footed if we fought the chimera head on.

“You aren’t fighting alone, Fate,” said Myne. “You have me. When we fought the orcs, I could tell that you weren’t used to fighting with a partner, so don’t worry about trying to match my pace. I’ll match yours.”
“Thanks. I appreciate it,” I said, and I meant it. “But why can’t I read this monster’s skills? Identify keeps showing me the word ‘error.’”
“Don’t worry about it. Your Identify skill can’t read its skills because they’re unstable. The chimera is an artificial creation sewn together from other monsters, all held together by a soul at its core.”
Of course I’m going to worry about it!
Myne said all these disturbing facts so casually, but this was a matter of life and death. From what I gathered, the chimera—Haniel—possessed a multitude of imperfect skills. Until this moment, I’d been able to go into battle armed with an idea of what my opponent was bringing to the table. With Haniel, that was impossible.
On top of that, Haniel was stronger than anything I’d fought before, and I wouldn’t learn anything more about it until we were already locked in battle. All at once, I felt a rush of anxiety through my entire body.
“You know, this might well be the perfect test for you, Fate,” said Greed. “If you screw up here, you won’t be able to defeat the Heavenly Calamity, even in your dreams. So, lift my blade and prepare!”
“I keep telling you,” I said, getting back to my feet. “Don’t tell me what I already know.”
I took a fighting stance, the black sword Greed at the ready. Myne watched me. As soon as she was sure I was ready, she raised her black axe and launched her attack. The axe landed heavily. Fracture lines exploded along the white cocoon as though it were a cracked egg.
Out from the cracked cocoon stepped the gleaming chimera.
It was titanic. Metal piping linked the grotesque creature together, a patchwork creation forged from pieces of countless monsters. The seething beast was white from head to toe, as though it had been chemically bleached, and at its very center was a sight that shocked me.
“Is that a person…?!”
“That is the chimera’s core.”
The young girl bound into the core of the monster opened her eyes. Her hair hung long and white, and her eyes were stained an intimidating shade of crimson.

Chapter 27:
The Insurmountable Chimera

THE GIRL WAS THE CHIMERA HANIEL, and her eyes were the same as Myne's. They were the same as mine, too, when my Gluttony pulled me into its starvation state. As much as I didn't want to think about it, I couldn't bury the thought: was this monster connected to us in some way?

"Myne, that girl…the girl you called the core…"

As I stumbled to finish my sentence, Haniel turned her head to stare directly at me.

Instantly, I was struck by an overwhelming pressure so intense that I couldn't breathe. This…this effect was one I shared, too. These were the same red eyes that immobilized my prey with fear. Did Haniel's eyes have that effect on me because of the difference in our stats?

"Avert your gaze, Fate," said Greed. "You'll lose your will to fight if you keep looking."

Damn it. I'd never imagined I'd have to fight with my eyes practically closed. How am I supposed to take this thing on if I can't look at it straight?

Myne watched me, unimpressed. "You can't even take the pressure. Show some guts, Fate."

"Easy for you to say…"

I glanced once more at Haniel, but the effect of its gaze kicked in immediately. My body froze when our eyes met. *What can I do against that?*

The monster wasn't about to patiently wait for me to work things out. It began to move on its six legs.

"We don't have any other choice," said Myne. "I need you to attack Haniel's legs while I fight the core. Don't forget, only you can land the killing blow, Fate."

"And that killing blow…"

"Yes. You have to attack the core."

As expected, destroying Haniel meant destroying its core. But the core was a young girl. I stood still, at a loss.

"It's not human anymore, Fate," said Myne, sensing my reluctance. "It's a monster in human skin. Do not be fooled by its appearance."

"But…"

"That sentimentality will be your death. Now, move! Haniel's launching an attack!"

"What?!"

The girl at the core of Haniel moved her hands and summoned hundreds of blue fireballs. They surrounded the monster's body in a large circle, then swirled together into a blistering star. The heat caused the air to waver. I knew immediately that my Fire Resistance would be useless against this spell.

The monster slapped the fused fireballs at the ground. Their overwhelming heat melted the earth before it into molten lava that swept toward us. I turned the black sword into the black scythe, though I was sure it would do no good. This was not a direct magical attack, meaning I could not cut it down. Myne's warning flashed in my mind as a giant wall of red-hot death flooded toward us.

This was not the time to take pity on the chimera because of the human trapped at its center. It meant to kill us. I was not strong enough to contain or control the beast while we worked out some other way of pacifying it. I had one choice: fight. I transformed Greed into the black bow and prepared to sacrifice my stats to the Bloody Ptarmigan attack.

Then Myne raised her axe high and stepped forward. "Fate, get behind me. Back me up with your bow. When you're ready, we'll take Haniel up close, together. Understood?"

"Uh…yeah. Got it. But what are we going to do about that wave of fire?!"

"This." Myne let loose a sweet-voiced battle cry, followed by a truly fierce swing of her axe. Its sheer force caused a shockwave that forced the lava back toward Haniel's knees.

"It's our turn now," Myne said. "Fate, make sure Haniel can't move."

"I'll try not to get in your way."

"That's the spirit."

With her black axe in one hand, Myne leapt toward Haniel, and in that same dance-like motion lopped off the beast's right arm. Haniel bellowed in pain, and the girl at the chimera's core wept scarlet tears of blood.

"Grr… Damn it!" I cried, realizing that her gaze had caught me yet again. I tore my eyes away and focused on my job. I had to keep the monster occupied to give Myne a fighting chance at landing solid, damaging blows. My best bet was the black bow and its magic arrows.

I drew the bow and materialized an arrow, which I loaded with the Sandstorm spell. It would now turn its target to stone. These same arrows had turned the crowned beast lich lord into a statue, and I'd gotten stronger since then. They'd have to be strong enough to work on Haniel's legs, too.

I aimed at one leg and let loose the shimmering sand arrow. The girl's face filled with pain as the monster's leg turned with a crackle to white marble and stuck to the ground.

"Yes!" I shouted. "Take that!"

"Not so cocky, Fate," said Greed.

Wait, wait, you must be joking… My stone arrows faced a new problem. Haniel's leg was returning to normal. Even the monster's regeneration ability vastly exceeded my own Health Regen. It wasn't just Haniel's stone leg; the arm Myne had just severed was starting to regrow from the wound.

"What the hell kind of regen ability is that?!"

"It's a biological weapon, Fate," said Greed, with a note of patience, "created specifically to fight, independently, for an eternity. It will

regenerate almost all damage, so your job is to support Myne until she lands something near fatal. Then, it's on you to finish the job."
Okay. I understood. The pressure was on. If we made one misstep, Haniel would regenerate, and we'd have to start over from scratch. Myne was incredibly strong, but I couldn't just rely on her strength. Likewise, I couldn't allow myself to get in her way. I had to do my part. Until then, we had to create opportunities. I fired multiple sand arrows to stop Haniel from moving.
"Myne!" I called. "Are you ready?"
"Not a problem."
As long as Haniel was still, the monster was an easy target for Myne. She lopped off Haniel's freshly grown right arm, and sliced off the left, too. From what I could see, it was as if Myne's black axe grew in power with each strike.
I fired arrows continuously to support Myne and asked Greed about it.
"Does Myne's black axe grow stronger the more she uses it?"
"Pretty much. The more she swings it, the stronger it gets. But it also gets heavier. Hm…in short, there's no limit to how powerful that weapon can get, but it becomes more and more difficult to wield."
"Ah. So, *that's* why it sank into the ground when Myne set it down earlier."
If the black axe had grown in power since our last battle with those orcs, that meant the weapon Myne swung now was unbelievably heavy. You could see that weight in the gigantic rifts that opened in the earth each time Myne landed.
"The black axe Sloth is capable of overwhelming destructive power. However, it takes its toll on the Agility of the person wielding it."
"Doesn't look like Myne's moving any slower, though," I said.
"She's definitely slowing down. Think about it, Fate. Why was she insistent that you keep Haniel still?"
If Myne was slower, then it was only the slightest drop. And even then, she still leapt into the air and sent Haniel's monstrous head flying with a swing of the black axe.
The core let out a cry unlike any before. Blood poured down the girl's face. I had my eyes averted so I couldn't see the source directly, but I was certain it leaked from her eyes.
Then the air around us shifted.
What?! What is this…pressure?
Greed made a tongue-clicking noise in annoyance. "Tch. This is bad, Fate. You've got the monster's back against the wall, so it's forcing its evolution. On your guard!"
"Evolution?! What?!"
Having finished her one-sided attack, Myne dropped to the ground next to me, away from Haniel. The weight in her axe cratered the earth where she landed; the shockwaves blew me completely off-balance.

“Fate, get behind me,” Myne said. “Haniel’s charging a full-scale attack. It’ll unleash it soon.”
I gathered that Haniel was using its evolution to prepare a sudden, powerful attack to wipe us out. Myne had sensed this and stopped attacking so she could protect me.
In my heart, I felt pathetic. Myne was protecting me. We weren’t fighting side by side. I was no different from the weakling I’d been back in Seifort, the fragile boy who had to hide behind Lady Roxy. I envisioned her majestic figure overlapping with Myne’s as she stood to defend me.
Had I really followed Lady Roxy just to end up in this position again? Why had I come to Galia in the first place? Was I still so badly in need of defending? Protection? I thought of the people I’d met on my way here. The battle near Lanchester and the adventurers who fought to save each other. My fight alongside Aaron, the Blade of Light. Studying Myne’s violent dance. I’d been through all that, yet in the end I was still here, cowering and powerless?!
If I couldn’t overcome the shadow of who I once was, and couldn’t overcome what I faced now, could I ever truly say that I, Fate Graphite, wanted to be the strength Lady Roxy relied on?
No. No, I could not.
Here and now, I had to bring forth the very limits of what power I carried within. I needed the kind of power that would allow me to fight alongside Myne—I needed Gluttony. Now that I stood in Galia itself, I wanted to change from who I once had been—no. I *had* to change!
I put a hand on Myne’s shoulder. When she looked back at me, I shook my head. *You have protected me enough*.
I gripped the black sword tight. “Greed, I’m going to unleash it.”
“I had a feeling you’d say that. Don’t overdo it, and don’t forget: it coming to you, and you going to it, are entirely different. One step too far, and you may as well consider yourself already gone. Do not forget.”
“Yeah, I know. I’ll show you that everything you’ve done hasn’t all been for nothing. I’ll show you the control I have over Gluttony!”
Now, bring it on!
I called Gluttony.
I usually spent all my focus keeping my Gluttony under control, but now, I concentrated on the opposite. To fight Haniel, I needed the power that accompanied Gluttony’s hunger. I had to awaken the monster that lurked inside me to gain the ability boost that came with starvation.
I felt Gluttony slithering inside me, hungering for my soul—and I felt my senses gradually sharpen. I had succeeded in keeping Gluttony down, simmering right at the edge of stability. I went no further.
Myne looked at me, surprise on her face. “Your right eye, it’s stained red. I’m surprised… It didn’t take you long to learn to stay in control with half of yourself given to Gluttony. Impressive.”

“What can I say? When the chips are down, I find a way. That, and I can’t have you treating me like a kid *all* the time.”
“I like that. Dependable. If we win this fight, I’ll start treating you like an adult.”
“Well, I’m out to win at all costs, so let’s do it!”
I wasn’t lying. Unleashing Gluttony came with a time limit. When I let myself go like this, I knew I had to be prepared to defeat my enemy, no matter what it took. If I couldn’t feed Haniel’s soul to Gluttony while I still had the will to hold it back, it would consume me entirely.
It was a high-risk decision, but I had no other choice if I wanted to face Haniel head-on. In the end, I bore the most despised Skill of Mortal Sin—Gluttony—but it was the only power I had with which to fight.
The power of Gluttony was unbelievable. I was still searching for the best way to exist alongside it. One answer, I realized now, was to call forth the starvation state myself.
I looked up into the eyes of Haniel, now in its fully evolved form. I felt no fear, no intimidation. Its gaze had no effect. My half-starved state gave me the power to stand and face the chimera’s overwhelming pressure.
Now I could truly fight alongside Myne.
The silhouette of the twisted mechangel began to float as it sprouted two sets of shining, feathered wings. I gripped the black sword tight and pointed the blade in the beast’s direction.
And all the while, Haniel’s crimson eyes ran with bloody tears.

Chapter 28:
Power Unleashed

FEATHERS FLOATED DOWN from Haniel's new wings. I didn't know what they were for, but I had a bad feeling regardless.
Myne frowned at the white feathers drifting toward us. "They explode when you touch them. Be careful."
"Dodging all those is going to take some seriously back-breaking gymnastics."
We leapt straight upward into the middle of the feathers, heading toward Haniel at the center. With Gluttony's starvation half-unleashed, all my abilities were boosted. I saw each feather without the least trouble as they floated in the air.
Not only that, I now had full control of my stats. No, I had access to even more. I would use them with the time I had in order to feast upon the mechangel's soul.
The feathers that hit the ground exploded, and the air around them roared with flame. A strange wind swept up a river of feathers, and they flew toward us. *Perfect timing*. *I can use those*.
"Greed," I said, "can you take those feathers?"
"With ease. They won't leave so much as a scratch. The question is, can you?"
"We're running out of time. Let's just find out."
It was reckless, and I knew it. I sliced at a feather. As expected, it exploded, but I used the blast to send me farther skyward. The burns from the blast damage would heal thanks to Health Regen.
Now clear of the explosive feathers, I transformed my sword into the black bow.
"We've come this far, so let's make the most of it. Greed, take ten percent of my stats. You know what comes next."
"With pleasure. But let me get those tasty stats first!"
The black bow changed shape in my hand. It transformed into what I'd decided to call an Apocalyptic Weapon of Mortal Sin, a huge obsidian arc pointed straight at Haniel. As I loaded a magic arrow, I imbued it with Sandstorm. I would turn Haniel and its annoying feathers to stone. Myne was in there among them, but I knew she'd be fine. With Greed aiming, not a single arrow would miss its target, even if I fired the barrage with my eyes closed.
"I'm counting on you, Greed!"
The Sandstorm-charged Bloody Ptarmigan rushed toward the earth like a bolt of lightning. It split into parts, striking down the feathers surrounding Haniel and turning them to stone before they exploded.

Haniel took the full force of the main attack. And this was no simple spell-loaded arrow. It was Greed's First Level secret technique, the Bloody Ptarmigan. The force of the attack was immense, and stone swallowed the enormous figure of Haniel.
I watched it from the air, shouting down at Myne. "Myne, now!"
Myne's glance told me she already knew the score, and she made a direct line for Haniel. Now trapped in stone, the winged monster was a sitting, gleaming duck.
"This is the best chance we'll get. Sloth, unleash!" Myne gripped her black axe and raised it high. In response, the axe began to transform. Its blade grew sharper and larger as if releasing all the energy stored within. Wrapped in black light, it seemed to somehow grow yet heavier.
Myne brought her new axe down upon Haniel, still encased in white marble. The impact carved chunks out of the very ground itself. The strength of it sent the lower half of Haniel's torso—legs and all—flying. The aftershocks leveled the ruins of the old village far off into the distance.
"What…what the hell was that?!"
"Don't act so shocked," said Myne. "We're not done yet."
Everything from Haniel's waist down was gone, but as long as the monster could regenerate, it was only a matter of time before it regained its footing. We had to finish it off while it was weak. As I dropped from the sky, I used the speed of my descent to move in for another attack.
I was about to transform Greed into the black sword when he shouted through my Telepathy. *"Fate! The black scythe!"*
The living half of Haniel had noticed my movement and prepared a counterattack by summoning blue fireballs around itself. The fireballs weren't only for me; they were also a defense against Myne, who was closing in just as quickly.
I cut the fireballs into nonexistence as I closed in on Haniel from above. The black scythe was the right choice; so long as a spell came directly from a skill, the scythe negated its effect entirely. But Haniel saw the spells were useless and instead crafted a blue barrier as it searched for an escape route.
"That barrier is a skill, Fate. Cut it down!"
"Got it."
Cutting through the barrier felt like cutting through thick metal. This was the first time I'd felt resistance while cutting through a skill. Was the barrier powerful enough to withstand the black scythe?
"What's the matter, Fate?" Greed said. "You unleash half your Gluttony, and this is the best you can do?"
Always the critic, even at a time like this.
"Shut up," I said, as the black scythe's blade fought the barrier.
"Use your eyes. See through the barrier! Its strength will not be spread evenly throughout."

I focused my red eye on the barrier, and a new world revealed itself to me. I saw the flow of the barrier Haniel had created. It was like blood coursing through a body, some parts hectic, other parts relaxed.
“Am I seeing the circulation of magical energy?”
“You are. Now, aim for a weak point!”
I pulled the scythe from the barrier, aligned myself with a point where the magical flow was weak, and swung again. This time, the blade sliced into it with delightful ease. As it cut deeper, the black scythe’s skill-negation effect caused the barrier to make a sound like shattered glass. With a hiss, it dissolved.
“We’re through!”
“Keep it up and cut the monster down, Fate!”
With the black scythe still equipped, I plunged at what remained of Haniel’s upper body and swung. Haniel crossed its arms to defend against the attack, but it made no difference. The scythe’s blade sank in from above. The rest was quick work. The blade cut through both Haniel’s arms and into its chest, cleaving straight to the core. The girl of white cringed at the attack, and part of me was pained to have hurt her.
As I was about to launch my follow-up attack, Haniel spread its wings. It was trying to escape to the skies, flinging explosive feathers around itself as it did. I lacked the ability to fly, which meant that if Haniel got too high, there’d be no way for me to fight it. Not even the black bow’s arrows would reach the mechangel if I lost sight of it.
I fell to the earth, dodging the exploding feathers. I wanted to jump back into the fray, but Haniel was too high. I couldn’t get to it. At this rate, all our work would be for nothing. Haniel would heal itself of all the damage we’d worked so hard to deliver.
Spots of red stained the dry earth by my feet. My right eye had started bleeding. I was closing in on my limit. If I didn’t want to lose myself, I had to take Haniel down, and quickly.
Myne caught up to me as I stood there, frustrated and furious at Haniel’s attempt to buy time. “I can get you up there,” she said.
“What? How?!”
Myne lowered her axe blade. Her eyes said the rest. *Get on*.
Are you serious?! I thought. You want me to ride your axe?!
But she was dead serious, and she was right. In the end, *I* had to finish Haniel off, because I was the one with Gluttony.
“Hurry up,” she said. “Before Haniel has a chance to heal.”
“All right. Let’s do this.”
But I had no way to defeat Haniel. The most powerful attack at my disposal was Greed’s First Level secret technique. It had a wide area of effect, but it wasn’t powerful enough to overcome Haniel’s regenerative abilities. I needed a more focused attack with a high damage output.

I weighed my choices. Should I just fire off the black bow's secret technique from close range? It was a reckless attack, but I had no other option. Or so I thought.

"Maybe it's about time you got a taste of the Second Level's secret technique, Deadly Inferno," said Greed.

"This whole time, you've been telling me I'm not ready for that."

"That's because you weren't. Now, I can see that you are. It's there in your eyes."

I wanted to ask him exactly what he meant by that, but Myne wasn't about to give me time. She pushed me toward her axe in a hurry. "Quickly, or Haniel will regenerate. You can talk with your sword as much as you want while you're in the air. Now, off you go!"

"Hey, Myne, wai—aaaaaaahhh!"

Before I could say another word, Myne launched me upward at Haniel.

"Okay, Greed, tell me how this technique works! And hurry!"

"My Second Level secret technique needs twenty percent of your stats. You'll have to aim where your enemy's magical energy is centered, or it won't work. If you miss, even a little, the technique will not activate."

"What the hell?! How am I even supposed to see that?!"

But then, I realized I *could* see it. With Gluttony half-starved, I saw it like I'd seen the pulse of the barrier earlier. We were closing in on Haniel. The monster was focused on regenerating and still hadn't noticed me. It was now or never.

"Greed, take the twenty percent!"

"With pleasure," the black sword replied.

I was at my very limit now. I had already lost ten percent of my stats to Bloody Ptarmigan. With a further twenty percent gone, the stat gap between me and Haniel had become a stat gulf. I'd no longer be of any use to Myne like this. In other words, I had no more room for error, let alone failure. Deadly Inferno had to be the killing blow.

I felt my power, strength, and accuracy draining from my body as Greed absorbed my stats. Then, with everything it had taken from me, the black scythe began its transformation.

Chapter 29:
The Third Level

THREE BLADES EXTENDED from the scythe like the sharpened claws of a wild beast. Just as the black bow had, the black scythe grew in size, making itself into a weapon that was difficult to wield. The scythe was transforming into its own version of an Apocalyptic Weapon of Mortal Sin.

Even before I swung it, I knew this scythe contained tremendous power. I felt it in the overwhelming pressure reverberating through my hands. I stared at my target. Haniel was still focused on its own regeneration.

"This is it!"

"Focus, Fate," said Greed. "Find the source of Haniel's magic."

I focused my gaze and searched. Magic flowed like a pulse through Haniel's body, spreading like the branches of a tree. I looked for its roots. As I expected, the source of the magical energy was the core, the girl of white. She was the heart of the monster. I would only end this if I tore that heart open with my scythe.

My problem was the speed of Haniel's regenerative abilities. At the start of our battle, the beast regrew its arm and head moments after Myne and I severed them. Now its regeneration had slowed. Haniel's lower half was taking longer to regenerate, as were its arms.

"Have Haniel's abilities weakened, Greed?"

"It forced its own evolution, and its regenerative skills have slowed as a result. Make no mistake: it will still heal, but it's going to take a little more time."

"Then now's our chance."

"Obviously."

I raised the scythe high above my head and prepared my attack. I would slice Haniel clean in half as my momentum moved me straight through the mechangel. I didn't care whether it saw me coming or not.

It did. Haniel raised a crackling barrier that trapped us together in midair. The girl in the core made a familiar summoning motion with her hands.

I've seen this before. No way—is she serious?!

Blue fireballs filled the space inside the barrier.

"She's intent on trapping you both in a horrific inferno," Greed said.

There was nowhere to run. What I thought was my coup de grâce had quickly become a self-sent invitation to my own doom. In this enclosed space, the blue fireballs would reduce me to ash before my Health Regen responded. That skill couldn't heal fatal wounds, after all. On the other hand, although Haniel's immense regenerative abilities had slowed, the beast could still recover from this attack.

Should I abandon Deadly Inferno to cut down the fireballs with the black scythe's skill-negation ability? No. If I did that, I'd have given up twenty

percent of my stats for nothing, leaving myself vulnerable regardless. And we'd have no more opportunities.
There would be no next time.
"It's now or never!" I shouted. "We feast before we burn!"
"I like the sound of that, Fate!"
The blue fireballs expanded, bursting alight one by one. They were incredibly, searingly hot, burning my clothes and enveloping me in scorching heat. My vision wavered with blue, but my stare did not stray from my target.
"Watch out, Fate!"
"We'll be fine! I saw this coming a mile away!"
I had already predicted Haniel's defensive movements when I saw the beast pour its magical focus into regenerating its right arm. As I expected, the arm burst through the whirlpool of blue flame to snatch me out of the air. I used the hand as a launchpad, stepping off the massive metal claws to throw myself at the weeping core.
"Do it, Fate!" Greed cried.
"Aaaaaaaaah!" I launched toward the near-empty core with a battle cry. The girl woven inside the core stared at me. Her red eyes, dripping with blood, bored into mine. I had expected her to put her hands up to defend herself, but she didn't move. It was almost as if she yearned for this strike. As if she wanted me to kill her.

The Deadly Inferno ripped into the girl's chest, tearing through the very core of the monster's magical energy. The girl's frail hand reached out and, for a brief instant, brushed my cheek. Immediately, the feelings of her heart bled into my own through Telepathy.
Fragmented memories flashed through my mind. Her memories, from before the girl had become the monster Haniel.
I saw a facility of some sort. It was completely white—walls, furniture, doors. Kids lived inside this bleached facility, and there was something… similar about all of them. At first, it was lively and vibrant—children playing and living together. But one by one, the children were taken away and never came back. Eventually, the girl's name was called, and she knew that she'd be taken to a dark, murky place. She cried out in fear, but another girl held her tightly.
The girl holding her looked just like Myne.
What are these memories?!
The girl's hand fell from my cheek, and her memories dissipated into the ether.
When I looked at Haniel now, the monster's pristine white body bubbled an abyssal, lifeless black.
"Greed, what's going on?!"
"This is the Second Level secret technique Deadly Inferno. It annihilates all life it touches. When this attack severs your enemy's magical core, they die. It doesn't matter who, or what, the enemy was. The curse of the scythe's blade spreads, decaying everything it touches. Even the strongest life cannot resist its power."
Despite Haniel's high-speed regenerative abilities, it was falling to pieces. Blackness stained its body as it fractured into shards that the wind picked up and blew away. The girl in the core did not meet a different fate. Slowly, her movements faded, and she became little more than a jet-black statue.
I fell to the earth along with the remains of the chimera Haniel. The beast's body broke as it landed, sending chunks of the crumbling chimera's corpse across the remains of a ruined village.
I felt as though the countless graves had been placed here for her, all that time ago.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +26,000,000, Strength +29,000,000, Magic +24,000,000, Spirit +28,000,000, Agility +14,000,000.

Together with the echo of the metallic voice, more stats than I'd ever imagined flowed into me. They were not accompanied by skills, perhaps because of the error message Identify had given me earlier. And…this felt different from my other feasts. Whenever I consumed a large number of stats, Gluttony went wild with ecstasy, a bliss so intense that it hurt. Now, it

was eerily silent. My starvation state subsided, and I felt none of the satisfaction that usually came with it.
After the metallic voice rang out, all I felt was crushing loneliness wrap my heart and squeeze it tight.
“What…what is this feeling, Greed? Is it because I ate a chimera, not an actual monster?”
“That’s how it goes. This is how it feels to eat one of your own, corrupted or otherwise. There’s no happiness, no excitement. All that’s left is…” Greed trailed off and didn’t finish.
As I stared at the blistered remains of Haniel, Myne joined me. “You’re not a kid anymore, Fate. Now, I’ll treat you like an adult.”
“It’s an honor, I assure you,” I mumbled. “Hey, by the way, can I ask you something?”
“What?”
“You and the girl in the core of Haniel, did you…know each other?”
Myne stood in silence for a time. “Maybe,” she said, finally. “I’ve forgotten so much of the past.”
However, she knelt and gently put a hand on the remains of Haniel.
So, they really had known each other. I couldn’t help but wonder whether it was really acceptable to devour the soul of a person so important to someone. Well, it was too late for me to feel apprehensive. The souls Gluttony swallowed were already doomed to an eternity of suffering.
“There was no other way,” Myne said, seeing right through my pensive expression. “When she became the chimera, the only answer left was to kill her. If we didn’t, more people would have died.”
I mused about the Galia of the past, long since destroyed. To think that a deadly relic of that past had been asleep, intact, for such an immensely long time. Perhaps other Galian weapons were still out there, resting, waiting. Haniel had sat in the open; it might even be likely that stronger, more menacing adversaries were hidden out in the wastelands. Just thinking about the possibility gave me goosebumps.
Glimpsing the Heavenly Calamity had filled me with fear unlike anything I’d ever known. I felt the chimera Haniel had given me another brief look into that terrifying past.
Myne fought ceaselessly against a world I did not understand, and she would continue that fight long into the future. I sensed that as a person bearing a Skill of Mortal Sin, the time would come when I would have to join that fight. But that time was not now. I had something more important to do first. I had not come all this way to Galia just to fight a chimera.
“Greed, surely those stats have to be enough.”
“They are. I’d ask you what you want to do…but that seems pretty obvious.”
“I need more power, Greed. Take the stats I’ve earned until now, and please, release your Third Level.”
“Very well. But first, give me those stats!”

With a laugh, Greed absorbed the millions of stat points inside me—everything I'd devoured on the course of our journey. The stats from the battle at the village I once called home, the battle I'd fought beside the Blade of Light, and the battle against the mechangel Haniel. Every single one of those victories slipped away.

Though the skills remained, my stats returned to their base level. I was right back where I'd started.

The black scythe emitted a great, dark light as it changed shape. As Greed pulled my last stats from my body, the light subsided, and I stared at Greed's new form. It was perfect. I was at a loss for words.

"No way. Greed, is this…?!"

"It's what you most wanted, isn't it? This is the Third Level: the black shield. Learn to wield it well!"

"You just watch me."

I took the shield in hand with a smile. It was bigger than I was, and it represented what I had long desired—the power to protect others!

Chapter 30:
In the Lands of Galia

IDENTIFY CONFIRMED IT: my stats had been sacrificed to strengthen the black sword Greed. As I expected, they were right back to where they had been when Greed and I first met.

Fate Graphite, Lv 1
Vitality: 121
Strength: 151
Magic: 101
Spirit: 101
Agility: 131
Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, Night Vision, Brawl, Marksmanship, Holy Sword Technique, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Bow Technique, Spear Technique, Fireball (Spell), Sandstorm (Spell), Hallucination (Spell), Strength Boost (Low), Strength Boost (Medium), Strength Boost (High), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Magic Boost (Low), Magic Boost (Medium), Magic Boost (High), Spirit Boost (Low), Spirit Boost (Medium), Spirit Boost (High), Agility Boost (Low), Agility Boost (Medium), Health Regen, Fire Resistance

My skills have really increased in number since all this began, I thought.
I hoisted the black shield to get a feel for it. It had real heft. It was probably the heaviest of all the weapon forms so far. I could handle it with one hand, but it seemed much more stable to grip with both.
"So, what do you think of my Third Level form?" Greed asked.
"I like it. Up until now, whenever I had to deal with a wide area-of-effect attack, I couldn't get out of the way or defend myself well—and never mind others! So…I guess I'm wondering…just how much can this shield defend against?"
"It shrugs off most attacks. The shield's area of defense grows depending on how much magical energy you put into it."
"So, you're saying I can also defend against a wide area-of-effect attack?"
"It's possible. It really comes down to how you use it."
Hm…he seems to mean that my area of defense depends on my Magic stat.
With this black shield, perhaps I'd finally pull off what I was worst at—fighting and defending in equal measure. Of course, ultimately, it was just as Greed said: what mattered wasn't the innate abilities of the shield, but how well I used it. Fortunately, we were in Galia, and there was no shortage of foes to practice on.

As I lifted the shield once more to admire it, Myne came over with an amused look on her cute face.
“You released a new weapon level, here in the middle of Galia… I’m shocked.”
“I didn’t have a choice,” I said. “Greed doesn’t give me the luxury of time or place. This sword isn’t just greedy, it’s selfish.”
“Ah, so he really hasn’t changed a bit, then. I’d forgotten for a moment there.”
Greed and Myne were old acquaintances, linked by some unknown past neither was eager to talk about. Their relationship was not one defined by affection. Instead, it was like a relationship between warriors forced to fight side by side. They knew each other, but their bonds didn’t run particularly deep. That said, they didn’t get in each other’s way. If the battle called for it, they cooperated.
But what about me? As another bearer of a Skill of Mortal Sin, how well would Myne and I get along? As if I was in a position to worry about any of that right now. I had something else I needed to ask Myne about.
“Myne, I need a favor. Do you mind?”
“Depends on what it is.”
“Well, it’s, uh, like this—when I released Greed’s new level, I lost all my stats. I really need your help getting some back up so I can hold my own out here. Please. I’m begging you!”
Myne stood still for a moment, contemplating my request. I was about ready to get on my knees and beg for real. With my current stats and the high-level monsters that roamed Galia, I was a dead man walking. With the stampedes to deal with, too, this was really a tight spot. I squirmed with worry.
Myne eyed me, then slowly smiled. There was something…terrifying about her expression. “Okay, I’ll lend a hand. You *did* help me defeat Haniel. And it would be troublesome for you to die on me.”
“Thank you!”
“But, before that, will you help me dig a resting place for her?”
Myne pointed to Haniel’s remains. Most of the corpse had crumbled into dust that drifted into the wasteland on the desert wind, but a small amount of the chimera remained.
I’d eaten the monster’s heart and soul. The least I could do now was give its body a place to rest. “Of course,” I said. “I’d be happy to.”
Myne’s reply was barely more than a whisper. “Thank you, Fate.”
I’d come to realize, through the time we’d spent together, that this soft whisper and emotionless face was occasionally how she hid her embarrassment.
We got to work making a final resting place for Haniel in the village center, aligned with all the other graves. Myne dug the hole with a single strike from her axe while I watched from the sidelines. We placed what was left of Haniel in the grave with great care, so as to avoid the rest of her crumbling

into dust. Still, there wasn’t much of Haniel left to bury, so the whole process didn’t take very long. It was surprising to think that the monster had been so immense, yet left so little behind. But I’d annihilated Haniel myself using Greed’s Deadly Inferno.

Myne and I filled the grave together. When we were done, Myne found a piece of debris to use as a gravestone and shoved it into the ground. Haniel’s simple resting place was complete.

“It’s over,” she said.

“Yeah. It is.”

Myne stood there for a time, gazing at Haniel's grave. She shook her head as if clearing her mind and starting afresh. "Okay, Fate. It's your turn now."
"Thanks, Myne."
"You're in luck, too. A horde of orcs is approaching. The sounds of our battle probably riled them up."
"How many orcs?"
Myne said there were two squadrons. Her ability to sense the presence of enemies was phenomenal. I wondered whether perhaps she read the magical energy in the air. It was a skill I wanted to learn myself, so I wouldn't have to rely on Gluttony's sharpened senses.
"Are you ready?" Myne asked.
"When you are," I replied.
"Then let's make it quick. I'll give you the last hit on all of them, but you'd better not miss."
"Uh, thanks."
Myne was strict, even on my low-stats state. At the same time, she *was* doing me an enormous favor. She might have been blunt, cold, and mostly unfriendly, but she really did have a good heart.
I transformed Greed into the black bow and decided to use the long-distance approach. I'd wait until my stats rose before I fought up close again. I considered maybe trying out the black shield's new abilities, if circumstances allowed, but I definitely had to make sure I didn't do anything too hasty right now.
My body was exhausted from the harrowing battle with Haniel, yet I was filled with an unquenched desire to fight. The feeling came from Gluttony. It had eaten Haniel, and now it wanted a little palate cleanser. I'd give it what it asked for, feeding it in exchange for higher stats. If I didn't, I'd never survive.
Myne and I stepped out of the village ruins and saw an ocean of green approaching us. Two squadrons was quite a number of orcs to behold, and every one of them looked *delicious.*
"Let's do this!" I shouted.
"Look at you," Myne said, "a wimpy noodle raring to go."
"I'll be strong again in no time. It's the one thing about me you can always rely on!"
It was the cycle of Gluttony, a skill that stole my enemy's powers when it devoured their soul. With it, I had gone from all my stats locked at one to defeating an enemy as powerful as Haniel. I was weak again now, but that strength would return soon enough.
Myne had said Gluttony's power was limitless. She'd even gone so far as to say that Gluttony surpassed the boundaries defined by the gods themselves. That power came at great cost. My mental state would likely erode before I ever reached divine heights. As I came to accept and face my Gluttony, I began to understand my burden. I realized that if I ever devoured

something as powerful as the Heavenly Calamity, I would need someone to…
“What’s wrong, Fate?” Myne called out.
She stood upon a pile of orc corpses, her head tilted. She’d finished most of the heavy lifting already. As I cleaned up the scraps with a few shots, the metallic voice rang in my head, informing me of my rising stats. It was as cold and as lifeless as ever.
Little by little, my arrows snatched back some of the stats I’d lost. Quickly, I felt strong enough to take down this horde’s high orc leader by myself. I approached the monster with the black sword at the ready. The orc moved as if it planned a counterattack, but it was entirely too slow. I whipped past, severing its head in a spray of gore.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +203,400, Strength +217,500, Magic +175,300, Spirit +154,300, Agility +168,400. New skills added: Strength Overload, Vitality Boost (High).

With these stats, I wouldn’t need to rely on Myne to get by anymore, even in Galia. As we stared at the fallen orcs before us, I spoke. “What will you do now, Myne?”
“I’ll continue to wander Galia. Will you come with me?”
Now, I knew why she had bought so much food before we left. I’d been curious about that, especially given her habit of stealing from my own stash. It wasn’t because she’d had a change of heart. It was because she knew she planned to leave.
“No, I have to go back to the border fortress. There’s somebody there I… want to protect.”
“I see. That’s a shame. So, this is goodbye.” With that, Myne abruptly began to walk off into the depths of Galia. She strode away without a hint of reluctance or regret.
I felt a little conflicted, but then I stepped forward and called out to her.
“Myne, can I ask you to do something for me?”
“What?”
“If I…lose myself to Gluttony…if I stop being me…I want you to kill me, Myne. You’re…you’re the only person I can entrust this task to.”
I asked her this last favor as one Mortal Sin bearer to another. I knew that if I was consumed by Gluttony, and if I went on a rampage because of it, the only person who could stop my carnage would be Myne. I needed to make sure I had a plan in place for that.
Myne’s eyes grew wide. It was an expression she didn’t show often. She sighed, stuck her black axe in the ground, and hugged me. It was a motion entirely out of character for her, and a tight, surprisingly painful embrace. I appreciated it anyway.
“Myne…”
“Okay, Fate. When that time comes, I’ll kill you.”

“I’m sorry, Myne. But…thank you.”
She said nothing more after that. In my heart, I apologized to her again. Still, now that I had a solution for my worst-case scenario, I could fight freely and without hesitation. I heard Greed belittling my sentimentality through Telepathy, but I paid it no mind. This was important to me.
I bid farewell to Myne and headed back the way I’d come. It was time to return to the sentinel city where Lady Roxy had to be by now. I’d finally be able to show her that I was no longer somebody who needed protecting.
Once again, I took the skull mask from my vest.

Side Story:
Roxy's Expedition

THE EXPEDITION BEGAN with an unexpected report from one of my scouts, given to me as our army marched toward Galia. According to the scout, smoke had been seen rising from the old Barbatos estate in the city of Hausen. I couldn't believe it, so I rode my horse to the location where the smoke was first sighted.

"It can't be," I muttered, though I disguised my surprise behind a cough. I checked closely to make sure that the direction in which we looked was indeed Hausen.

It was. And there was, no doubt about it, smoke. What was going on in Hausen, which had for so long been an abandoned haven for the undead? Undead monsters couldn't wield fire, which made me fear that perhaps another creature could have arrived. Were they waging some sort of monstrous turf war?

Intently examining the smoke columns rising from Hausen more, I realized I knew this type of smoke well. I'd seen the same gentle smoke back at home, rising from the chimneys of homes on the Hart estate when people cooked. If that was true, it meant people were now living in Hausen—lots of people—even though it was undead territory.

"I think it would be wise to investigate," I said to the scout. "Head back to your commanding officer, and tell him to wait on standby until I give further word."

"Understood!"

For good measure, I also told the scout to send me ten battle-hardened soldiers. He was somewhat shocked to learn that I planned to head to Hausen myself, I suppose because it was unusual for holy knights to conduct such investigations in person. Regrettably, for the most part, it was rare for holy knights to do *anything* themselves, unless the task was slaying a monster only they could handle.

That said, I needed to see what had happened in Hausen with my own eyes. As I watched the scout return to the rest of my soldiers, I thought back to what I knew of the current state of the territory.

Hausen had been governed by the Barbatos family—which, like the Harts, was one of the Kingdom of Seifort's five esteemed families. However, Hausen had been overrun with monsters and abandoned when the head of the family, Lord Aaron Barbatos, the Blade of Light, had suddenly retired. From the stories I'd heard, Lord Aaron's retirement had been caused by the tragic loss of his entire family. Monsters had besieged Hausen while he was away on a quest to handle a small stampede that had crossed the Galian border.

As the Blade of Light, Lord Aaron's strength had been a great convenience for Seifort's king, who sent him on many quests to hunt and fight monsters. As a result of these ceaseless battles, Lord Aaron had accrued much hate, and from that hate, an awful monster had been born: a lich lord called The Genesis of Death, who bore a focused, unceasing grudge against the Blade of Light himself.

It was said that lich lords had the power to control the dead. It was also said that, compared to other monsters, they were exceptionally cunning and intelligent, and particularly skilled at manipulating their opponents' emotional weaknesses. It seemed likely that the lich lord had brought those skills to bear on Lord Aaron so effectively that the result had been a near fatal blow to Lord Aaron's psyche. Thus, he had put down his sword and retired.

That was the sum total of my knowledge of the incident.

"Lady Roxy, the men are ready to move out."

"Then there's no reason to wait," I said. "Let's go."

The squad accompanying me to Hausen was hastily put together, but it was made up of some of our army's best soldiers. I'd left the decision to the troops themselves, which meant that each soldier with me now was a volunteer. I was glad for this show of support, but as their commander, I could not let my joy show in my expression.

At my order, we rode toward Hausen. The journey would take a few hours on horseback. As we rode onward, Miria, from the medic squadron, approached me. She had light-chestnut hair and wore an open, friendly expression.

"Do you really think there will be people in Hausen, Lady Roxy?"

"I think it's likely. However, I've heard the city is home to the Genesis of Death, a powerful lich lord. We can't rule out the possibility that the smoke is a trap of some kind."

"Oh, a crowned beast? I've never seen one before. Oh, dear. I'm nervous all of a sudden!"

It was clear from how Miria talked and held herself that she was a new recruit. However, I knew she was exceptionally skilled with a blade. She'd been posted to the medic squadron on account of her inexperience, but there was no doubt in my mind that, within a few years, she would be a commanding officer.

"Miria, I know you must be nervous, but you mustn't voice those feelings. Your hesitance will spread to those around you."

"Understood. I-I'm sorry." Miria looked utterly despondent. At this rate, perhaps "commanding officer" was further down the line than I had thought…

From my left, I heard raucous laughter. It belonged to Mugan, a squad commander in his late thirties or early forties. "Ah, Miria," he said, "still so green! If one monster scares you so much, perhaps you'd best head home already, hm?"

“Ugh. You know the whole reason I can’t stand you is because you *always* say that, Captain Mugan,” Miria muttered.
Miria didn’t like Mugan, but Mugan had a daughter who was her age. I was sure that he couldn’t help but worry about her in his own way. However, Miria found his “own way” obnoxious. That left me stuck between their bickering, and it was more than I could stand.
“Be quiet, both of you. Mugan, you’re a commanding officer, are you not? Is it safe to leave your squad without their leader?”
“Not a problem. My squad’s made up of the finest soldiers. That leaves me free for little expeditions like this!” Mugan’s smug expression said it all: *How do you like that, Lady Roxy?*
Miria rode her horse a little closer to mine so she could lean in and whisper. “When we put together the squad to investigate Hausen, almost all the commanding officers volunteered. But if they all went, who’d look after the army, you know? So, they decided that only one commanding officer could join the investigation, and Mugan took the position by force. He’s such a child.”
“Oh…”
It made me happy to think that so many commanding officers had volunteered their services. That said, when I imagined Mugan physically bullying his way into the investigation, I couldn’t help but chuckle.
“That explains why it took so long to put the squad together,” I added.
“Exactly!” Miria giggled.
Mugan bellowed from atop his horse. “I can hear you, Miria!”
“Ugh. He’s got ears like an elephant!”
Mugan told Miria he’d report her comments to her squad leader, after which Miria looked at me with teary eyes, pleading for help. The soldiers behind us chuckled to see me once again awkwardly positioned at my wit’s end. While I was glad that the troops were amicable with each other, I was admittedly a bit worried about their discipline.
As our team arrived on the outskirts of Hausen, I noticed something odd. Or, rather, an odd lack of something. “How strange… I can’t sense any monsters around here.”
Mugan and the surrounding squad nodded. As we drew closer to the city itself, I was shocked to find normal people walking its streets.
“Captain Mugan, what in the world happened here?”
“According to Miria’s intel, someone’s cleared the place of monsters. I guess that girl really is good for something, huh? Anyway, since we never saw any reports about this event back at Seifort, I gather it happened after we left for Galia. How shall we proceed, Lady Roxy?”
“We’ll enter the city.”
I pulled the reins of my horse and changed direction toward Hausen’s outer gate. The outer walls were crumbling from long years of harsh weather and neglect. They were in no condition to keep any would-be attackers at bay.

People who I assumed were residents of Hausen noticed our squad as we arrived. They knelt and bowed their heads. I couldn't tell whether they did it out of respect for my holy knighthood, or out of fear. Nonetheless, the reaction was not what I wanted, so I urged the citizens to stand and raise their heads.
"I am the holy knight Roxy Hart. I'm here with a few questions. Would you mind escorting my troops and I to the person in charge of the city?"
"That would be Lord Aaron Barbatos," said the woman nearest to me.
"Lord Aaron Barbatos?!" I cried.
How could that be? He'd abandoned Hausen and retired. He had returned?
The soldiers around me looked as baffled as I did.
The woman seemed a little worried at our shocked expressions, but she continued. "Yes, he'll be in the central hall. I can show you the way, if you'd like to follow me. But the city streets are still full of debris, so I hope you won't mind tying your horses at the post over there."
The debris meant that it hadn't been very long since the monsters were driven out. We got off our horses and left them with one of our men by the city walls, then passed through Hausen's outer gate with our guide.
"It's still in such disrepair," I said.
"Hm." The woman didn't respond.
Much like Hausen's outer walls, the buildings inside the city were in terrible shape from years of neglect. They slouched, barely retaining the shape of what they once were. The scars of fierce battle covered the buildings and carved out sections of the streets. It looked exactly like I would expect of a place that, until recently, had been home to only monsters.
"We've only just begun repairs," said the woman, "and we're very short of hands. That, and I…"
She looked at the ground and said nothing, but I knew the meaning of her unspoken words. In a world that revolved entirely around skills, it was impossible to understand the inferiority felt by those who bore skills deemed useless. I knew because my mother bore the same burden, and she'd suffered through that discrimination from those around her.
I also knew because of Fate. When we'd met as children, he had been so hopeful and optimistic. Then, when we met again years later, time and abuse had changed him. He saw only the inescapable reality of a world governed by skills. Still, it had warmed my heart to see those hopeful parts of the old Fate slowly return when he became a servant to the Hart family.
I shook my head clear; I was letting my thoughts wander again. I had to be more careful.
"There's no need to look so glum," I said to the woman. "You're more necessary and important than you give yourself credit for. Without you, who would explain the city to us and guide us through it?"
"Thank you. I never imagined a holy knight would speak such words to me."
The woman finally raised her head, and I was glad to see a brighter expression on her face as she gazed at me.

“Now me, Lady Roxy! Say something nice to me, too!” Miria shouted from the back of our procession. She held her hand high and ran up next to me as she chattered with excitement.
“Huh?” I was unsure of what to do in response to her barrage.
Mugan appeared between us. “What’re you on about, Miria? You haven’t done anything yet! Well, nothing but pester Lady Roxy.”
“Eh?! That’s not true in the slightest! Right, Lady Roxy?”
I said nothing.
“Lady Roxy? Why’re you giving me the silent treatment?!”
Mugan shook his head. “You see?”
Her eyes brimming with tears, Miria clasped my arm and clung tight.
I’m sorry, Miria, but he’s right, I thought. And I can’t lie to myself, let alone you.
Mugan watched Miria trap me and burst into laughter. I was certain a new round of their bickering was going to start, but suddenly, an unfamiliar voice chuckled nearby.
This fresh laughter came from the woman guiding us. “I’m sorry, but you all seem like such good friends!”
Mugan and Miria looked up in utter seriousness, and their voices cried out in unison. *“What?!”*
This response seemed to be exactly what the woman was waiting for, and she burst into another peal of laughter.
Just as we started to get to know each other better, we arrived at our destination. The central hall was, perhaps, the city of Hausen’s most spacious location. There, we found the old man directing the townspeople. He was not dressed very differently from anyone else, but there was an aura about him, a kind of charismatic charm to his gaze.
Our guide ran over to him with a smile. “This holy knight requested to speak with you, Lord Aaron!”
As he heard the woman’s words, the man turned toward me and gave me a polite nod, which I returned. He made sure somebody else could continue his work before he made his way to us. I could tell up close that he was older, but I sensed power in him that more than rivaled any active holy knight. That was the mark of a man who’d earned the king’s recognition and the title of Blade of Light.
“It’s nice to meet you, Roxy Hart,” Lord Aaron said. “You may already have been informed, but I am Aaron Barbatos, and I govern Hausen. As you can see, we’re busy restoring it to its former glory. My apologies for not greeting you someplace nicer.”
“No, I should apologize for the sudden, unexpected visit. But why…?”
“This way, please. I know what you want to ask.”
As Lord Aaron and I walked, Mugan approached us with his own request. He wanted to take a small group of men to explore Hausen so that he could make a full report to Seifort. Lord Aaron was all too willing to oblige, so Mugan took Miria and the remaining soldiers to investigate the city. Miria

clearly wanted to stay with me, but Mugan summarily dragged her off by her collar. Her cries of “Lady Roxy!” echoed, even from a distance. I felt a little embarrassed at this display.
Lord Aaron simply laughed. “You have a fine group of soldiers under your command,” he said. “It’s clear they’re able to work independently, too.”
“They’re an indispensable support,” I replied. “But are you quite sure it’s all right for us to investigate Hausen like this?”
I felt compelled to ask again. Holy knights often considered it insulting to have others inspect their cities and estates. Not long before arriving in Hausen, my army had passed the Lanchester estate, and their horrible treatment of us was still fresh in my memory. The head of the estate, Lord Rudolph Lanchester, hadn’t allowed us entry. We were both members of the five esteemed families, yet he wouldn’t even show us his face. I ended up ordering my soldiers to wait on the outskirts of the estate and set up camp while we arranged to restock our provisions.
Many of my troops had looked forward to visiting Lanchester’s estate, as they’d heard of the gigantic inn housed within its walls. The disappointment in the air among the men had been palpable. It was so bad, Miria had come to my tent and tried to get me to sneak into the city with her. Naturally, Mugan had foiled her reckless plan.
The men who delivered our provisions in Lanchester had told us a most curious rumor. Just a few days earlier, an adventurer with a black axe had beaten Rudolph to within an inch of his life. Since then, Rudolph had grown paranoid of all wandering adventurers. If that story was true, it meant he was punishing us for the actions of others. The rumors had seemingly gotten well out of hand; the men even told us that the adventurer who launched Rudolph into the sky was a tiny child.
In stark contrast, Lord Aaron was happy for us to inspect and investigate Hausen to our hearts’ content. “You see, it’s just as helpful for me as for you,” he said with a smile.
“What do you mean?”
“If your men happen to stumble across leftover monsters during their investigation, they’ll take care of them for us.”
“Are you saying monsters are still lurking in Hausen?!” I hadn’t felt any monsters’ presence, and I hadn’t noticed the slightest hint of fear in the townsfolk, so I had assumed the monsters had all been wiped out.
Aaron stroked his beard calmly as he took in my shocked expression. “I’m saying it’s a possibility,” he said, then added jokingly, “which means I’d love for your men to investigate every corner of the city.”
Although the tone of his voice was jovial, there was a certain weight to his words. I wasn’t worried about Mugan or the others, but I was a little anxious about young Miria.
“You can see the castle from here,” said Lord Aaron. “It’s a bit battered, but it’s ours.”
“It seems like…only half of it is left.”

“Ah, yes. That happened when we fought the lich lord. Most of the area is sturdy, though,” he said, and pointed. “Let’s head to the terrace.”
At the terrace were a table and chairs. It seemed as if they were used often, and when I sat down, I understood why. The view was fantastic. “Goodness. You can see the whole of Hausen from here.”
“Exactly. It’s also a quiet place, perfect for our private discussion. You’ve certainly grown since I last saw you.”
“Are you talking about…me?” I had no recollection of ever meeting Lord Aaron.
It seemed as though that wasn’t true of Aaron himself. “Mason and Aisha are old friends of mine,” he said. “When the two of them brought a child into the world, they asked me to name her. Initially, I declined, thinking it too great a responsibility. But, when I saw your face, your name came to me as naturally as breathing. That name is the one you carry now.”
“My parents never told me any of this.” It really was the first I’d heard of it. I had no idea the famed Lord Aaron had named me!
He smiled. “I asked them not to. But us meeting here, like this, feels like a kind of destiny. It seemed like the perfect time to tell you. I hope you’re not disappointed!”
“Not at all. To be named by one of Seifort’s heroes is a true honor.”
“Former hero, you mean. I’m sure you heard the details regarding my retirement.”
“Yes.” I had. Other holy knights often spoke of how the tragedy of Hausen had proved that even the Blade of Light was just a man, in the end. Still, the man standing before me did not look like someone who had lost his will to live. On the contrary, he seemed to overflow with vital energy.
Lord Aaron once again ran a hand through his beard as he recalled the recent past. “About a week ago, a young man arrived at the settlement nearby. I knew immediately that he possessed great strength. I’m a little embarrassed to admit it, but he reminded me of my son, and I felt the need to know more about him.”
When I asked, Lord Aaron described how he had taught the young man basic swordsmanship. I was more than a little envious. Only the luckiest people could hope to receive instruction from the Blade of Light himself.
“From the beginning,” Aaron continued, “it was clear to me that he possessed something unusual worth keeping an eye on. It wasn’t talent, and it wasn’t natural ability, nor the skill he had been born with. Rather, there was…a weight to the swing of his blade, the sort you only see in people who have someone to fight for. I had a feeling that, to him, the person he fought for was very important indeed. He didn’t confess much of this, but his movements reminded me of a past I’d long forgotten.”
“So, you decided to wield your sword once more?”
“I never imagined I’d have a change of heart at this age. But, after the two of us fought together to clear Hausen of the monsters infesting it, I felt young again. That young man showed me the path forward and made me

aware of my own potential. I'm rebuilding Hausen to give him a place to come home to."
"He's not here anymore, then?"
"No. He left on his own journey. It was only by coincidence that we met in the first place."
I wondered whether I'd ever heard of this young man who'd played a key role in freeing Hausen. "What is this adventurer's name?"
"You'll have to forgive me, but he did not want it known by others. I'm sorry, Roxy."
"No, no, it's nothing for you to apologize for, Lord Aaron. I was merely curious." Admittedly, I was a little disappointed, but there was nothing I could do about it.
Lord Aaron stared out at Hausen, then turned to me with a solemn expression. "You're headed for Galia, aren't you?"
"Yes, but how do you know?" I hadn't uttered a word about it, and the army under my command was stationed well out of sight of the walls of Hausen.
"It's simple. What other reason would a young holy knight like yourself have to visit a place like Hausen? It's clear you weren't sent all this way just to investigate the ruins, but the pieces fit if you're on an expedition to Galia. And I wouldn't put it past the holy knights of Seifort to make such a decision. A man like Mason would never send his beloved daughter to that country of death, so I can only assume the worst. Is he…?"
I had no words. I nodded.
"I see," said Lord Aaron. "A great pity. With Mason gone, there must not be anyone left to stop Seifort's holy knights from running amok. It seems they've already started by sending you to Galia. But perhaps I've no right to talk of things like responsibility and obligation. After all, I threw those away when I retired."
Lord Aaron looked out at the ruins of Hausen. There was something lonely in his gaze; restoring the city to its former glory would be a long road. After this silence, he turned to me once more. "If you are interested, I could teach you some techniques that will help you on the battlefields of Galia. What do you think?"
"I… Are you sure?"
"Of course. I did name you, so in a way you're like one of my children, aren't you? If it's within my ability to do so, I will help you wherever I can."
It was an unbelievable opportunity. However, I did not want to hold up our march to Galia for purely personal reasons. As I thought the offer over, Mugan returned; Lord Aaron's eyes lit up as he saw the captain.
The Blade of Light turned to me with a modified proposal. "How about this? Leave a squadron here, and have the rest of your army continue their march. They won't move quickly; they'll need time to get to the next city and stock up on provisions. While your army is on the move, you can stay here, and I'll train you. We'll need about three days, after which you can take your squadron and regroup with the rest of your men. I understand

you'll need to discuss it with your commanding officers, but what do you think?" Aaron's gaze flicked in Mugan's direction.
"I guess that's decided, then," said Mugan, immediately exiting. He was clearly heading off to put Lord Aaron's suggestion into action.
"I'm sure we can trust that man to see that everything goes to plan," said Lord Aaron. "So, what do you think, Roxy?"
Lord Aaron's proposal was already in motion, and I had no reason left to refuse his offer.
"I humbly accept," I said.

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Mugan returned to Hausen with a squadron. There wasn't much for them to do in the city, so they helped with repairs while I underwent my training. Mugan and many other soldiers had looked up to the Blade of Light since they were children, and they wanted to help him. Since time was limited, they focused on the outer walls protecting the city. With those repaired, the townspeople could sleep knowing monsters could not easily attack.
Lord Aaron was grateful for the assistance. Before we started training, he said, "I must thank you again for your aid in Hausen's restoration. You're much too kind."
"Oh, no, it isn't me. Please, thank the sheer enthusiasm of my soldiers."
"Yes, they're an admirable bunch, striving hard to give their very best, aren't they? Their actions prove the trust they have in you, Roxy. Keep it up. Praise them when they do well, and correct their course if they falter."
"I still can't believe it, but when you put it like that, I suppose we really have grown to trust each other."
"While leading these troops, you still haven't seen battle?"
"Not yet."
Aaron nodded and drew his sword. "You'll know Galia as soon as you reach it. Battles there can turn in an instant, and you'll feel the importance of trusting the people you fight with. In any case, let's begin, shall we? Draw your sword."
The castle's courtyard was spacious, well-suited for our practice. Not only was there room to move, but if our sparring grew fierce, we wouldn't need to worry about breaking anything of value. I could tell from Aaron's stance that he didn't intend to hold back. I had no choice but to respond in kind.
The moment I drew my sword from its sheath, training began. The sharp clang of blade on blade echoed through the courtyard. Lord Aaron closed the distance between us instantly, his sword aimed at my neck. Somehow, I deflected that sudden attack.
"Looks like you've got a good grasp of basic combat if you can defend against a strike like that," said Lord Aaron. "How about this?"
As he rained a barrage of strikes down on me, I kept a safe distance and parried each, searching for an opportunity to counter. When he took a long

step forward, planting his foot heavily on the ground, I replied with my first counterstrike.
However, I sliced through air. Lord Aaron had predicted my attack and used it to step behind me. “Your swordsmanship is the very portrait of your father’s,” he said. “Your movements are subtle. No wasted motion. That allows you to move from defense to offense in a blink. In some ways, it’s perfect.”
“Thank you, Lord Aaron.”
“Now, let’s pick things up a notch. Are you ready?”
“I’m ready!”
In the next instant, Lord Aaron launched a slice at my neck, just as he had earlier. I moved once more to parry the strike, but as I did so, he kicked dirt up from the ground. With my vision momentarily blocked, I had no way to respond. Aaron’s blade stopped just before it would have cut through my stomach.
“I yield,” I said.
“You think that was underhanded, don’t you? Know this, Roxy—in a real battle, survival is everything. It will be no sparring match. Your swordplay is honest, and it is beautiful, but for that reason, it may lead you into danger. Don’t think that, because your opponent holds a sword, they will only use their blade to attack you. On the battlefield, you must see everything as a weapon. Let’s go again.”
We put a little distance between us and jumped into another round. Now, I focused not just on Lord Aaron, but on his surroundings. I parried a strike to my stomach and retreated. Then, to ensure he wouldn’t press my back to the wall, I kicked a piece of rubble near my feet directly at Lord Aaron.
He wasn’t expecting me to pick up his tactics so quickly, and surprise flashed across his face. He cut the debris in half and moved to close the distance once more, then stopped.
“What horrid footwork!” he exclaimed.
The statement seemed a little out of the blue, but the reason for it was his realization that I had kicked not one piece of rubble at him, but two. The second I knew his gaze had been caught by the first piece of rubble, I’d launched another behind it. As such, when he cut down the first, it looked as if another piece came straight out of its middle. He had to stop his follow-up attack to deflect the second piece.
I did not want to let this momentary pause go to waste, but as I moved in to take advantage of the opportunity, Aaron hit the second piece of debris at my feet. I lost my balance trying to get out of the way, and at the same time I lost my chance to strike.
I had thought this might turn the skirmish in my favor, but my opponent was the Blade of Light. The battle was never going to go smoothly.
Lord Aaron seemed to think differently and laughed. “I must say, you got me. You certainly pick things up quickly. It seems that, rather than giving

you long lectures, it's better if I let the sword do the talking. Ready for another round?"
After that, we engaged in a silent back-and-forth of attack and defense. It was exactly as Lord Aaron said; I barely had time to catch a breath through the echo of our swords clashing. Time flew by, and I suddenly realized I was so exhausted that I could barely stand. The sky above us was covered in a blanket of night.
"Let's call it a day, shall we?" he said.
"Thank you, Lord Aaron." I felt the energy drain from my body as I sheathed my sword and flopped to the ground, exhausted.
Lord Aaron watched me as he stroked his beard, worry crossing his features. "Did I overdo it?"
"Not at all. I'll be fine. Look." I quickly got to my feet to prove it, but couldn't stop my legs from visibly trembling.
"Hm. Make sure to relax and get a good night's sleep," Lord Aaron said.
He disappeared into the castle, and shortly after, I heard hammering echoing inside it. He was working on repairs again, even though we'd spent the whole day training. His vitality was truly amazing.
I was utterly exhausted. It had been a long time since I'd worked so hard. Since my father had passed away, nobody had been able to give me this type of intense training. When Lord Aaron had offered to train me, it had filled me with memories of those days. I suspected that was why I had pushed myself especially hard. At the same time, the exercise was refreshing.
Thoughts whirled in my head—memories of the recent past. The day I became the new head of the Hart family, the first time I beheld the army I now led to Galia, and the person I had left behind in Seifort, Fate.
What was Fate doing now? Had he made it safely to the Hart family estate? Perhaps my mother was already troubling him with her doting. Imagining Fate's awkward expression in the face of my mother's incessant affection made me smile.
Roxy, you must stop! Keep this up, and you'll get homesick all over again.
I shook my head to clear it of stray thoughts, then realized Miria was calling to me. "Lady Roxy! Lady Roxy! Are you there?"
She was looking for me, and she wasn't being quiet about it. She'd stayed at Hausen with Mugan and the others, and had volunteered to assist me, since we were both girls. On the one hand, I was happy to have her around, but on the other…
"Aha! I found you! When people call you, the least you can do is respond to them, Lady Roxy!"
Miria tried to leap into a hug, which I deftly evaded.
"What?!" she cried. "Why would you avoid me?!"
"Look at me, Miria! I've just wiped all this sweat off." That was apparently the least of Miria's concerns. Still, it mattered to me. Sometimes that girl really didn't get it.

She moved closer to me, but I remained on my guard. “In that case, how about taking a bath? It’s all prepared and ready for you!”
“Oh, really?!” Could there have been better news at that moment?
I maintained a safe distance from Miria as she explained that Hausen had its own natural hot spring. It was the same as the Hart family estate! My body was so sore that it filled with energy at the thought of a relaxing hot spring bath.
A little way from the castle, the troops had set up tents in the spacious town square. Miria took me to a tent set up for me; I quickly peeled off my armor and prepared a change of clothes and towel for the hot spring.
I was a little concerned to find that Miria had done exactly the same thing.
“Er, Miria? Why are you carrying a towel and a change of clothes?”
“I think that’s fairly obvious, isn’t it? It’s because I’m going to bathe with you!”
“Sorry, Miria, but…no. No, you’re not.”
“What?! But why not?! What’s wrong with me?!”
It wasn’t that anything was wrong with anyone, I was just unaccustomed to bathing with others. I couldn’t imagine relaxing with Miria splashing around. That was too embarrassing to admit, however, so I could only apologize.
“This is the pits. The whole reason I came here was that I was dreaming of this moment…”
“I think now is a bad time to voice those thoughts, Miria,” I said.
“Eh? But why?!”
She still didn’t grasp what I wanted her to understand. I pointed behind her and to the left, where a livid Mugan held back his real rage.
“When you said you wanted to help Lady Roxy no matter what, Miria, it was so earnest I really thought you were turning over a new leaf,” he said with a dry chuckle. “But you actually haven’t changed a bit, have you?”
“Ugh! Captain Mugan. What’re you doing here? I’m certain you’re supposed to be at the team meeting right now!”
“I had a bad feeling that I couldn’t quite place. Call it intuition. And look what I find when I follow it! We’re going, Miria. Lady Roxy’s exhausted, and it’s our job to help her recover by not getting in her way.”
“Getting in her way? That’s not what I was doing, was it, Lady Roxy?”
Once more, I was quiet.
“The silent treatment?! Again?!” Miria called out desperately as Mugan dragged her into the night.
I averted my eyes. I’m very sorry, Miria, but I just want to take a relaxing bath by myself.

***

The following day, Lord Aaron taught me another way to use the holy sword's tech-art, Grand Cross. Based on my current level and abilities, he determined I'd be able to execute it.
The lesson began with a demonstration. "The trick with this tech-art is to hold down its power the moment before release, like so."
White light emanated from Lord Aaron's sword. The light grew, and when it was about to burst from his blade, Lord Aaron held that energy within it, imbuing the sword with holy light.
"By maintaining this state," he said, "you can give your sword all the holy power of the Grand Cross tech-art. Naturally, this raises the power and durability of the holy sword itself. This is helpful in situations where the tech-art's strong point—its wide area of effect—becomes its weak point. That area of effect can make Grand Cross difficult to deploy without harming allies. But, with this, you can channel its power into single strikes, and the holy energy from your blade becomes effective against undead monsters, too."
It was a perfect evolution of the tech-art. The question was, could I do it?
"Relax your shoulders, Roxy. You'll only make it harder on yourself. The best thing to do first is simply try."
"Understood." I focused my energy into my blade to begin the Grand Cross tech-art, and the holy sword shone. I waited for the light to reach its zenith, then tried to contain the energy as Lord Aaron had.
It didn't go according to plan. The energy built up in the sword escaped, bursting throughout the courtyard and cleansing it in holy light. "Oh…"
I'd failed, but Aaron still smiled. "Nobody gets it right the first time, Roxy. The only way to perfect the technique is to practice until your sense of it sharpens. If you're worried about the castle grounds, don't be. They're battered, and I don't mind if your practice results in a little more damage. Just focus. Dive into the technique."
"No, I can't add to your burden. I'll limit my practice to the courtyard."
Lord Aaron wanted me to go for it without reservation, but the Grand Cross tech-art took a toll on my Vitality and Magic stats. Practicing one strike after another was nearly impossible. I took five minutes to recuperate before I tried again. The result was the same. Aaron stood by my side, offering encouragement with each failed attempt. I tried and tried, but…
"Look on the bright side, Roxy," he said, after what must have been my fiftieth attempt. "All this work has done a marvelous job of weeding the courtyard."
"I'm sorry, Lord Aaron…"
I had a feel for the technique now, but I could only imbue the sword with holy energy for about three seconds. After that, the charge burst from my weapon as the usual Grand Cross attack. Three seconds was not nearly long enough to be useful in battle. It was humiliating to see my sword radiate light for mere moments after I swung it.

Okay, Roxy, let's give it one more try! As I channeled energy into my holy sword one last time, my vision went blurry. I fell to my knees.
At that point, Lord Aaron put a stop to our training for the day.
"That's enough for now," he said. "It's a tiring technique. You won't be able to practice at all if you push yourself to the breaking point."
"Yes, you're right. I'll try again tomorrow."
"We'll get there yet, Roxy."
There was plenty of light left in the day, so I busied myself helping with the city's restoration. We were only staying for a few days, and I feared we wouldn't be able to repair the entirety of the outer wall in that time. However, at the very least, I wanted to show thanks by trying our best. Even if I couldn't summon another Grand Cross, I could still use my body just fine.
Lord Aaron and I headed to the section of the outer wall nearest the entrance gate. Mugan was likely already there, overseeing the repairs. The soldiers had decided that the main gate area deserved immediate attention because it was the face of Hausen. Still, how much work could we really do in just three days? To be honest, my expectations were low.
However, when Lord Aaron saw the repairs to the gate, he was impressed. "This is just fantastic."
"My word…" I said.
Mugan ran over once he noticed we'd arrived. "Have you finished training already?"
"We have, so we've come to help out."
"Music to my ears. We'll make some real progress with two holy knights here."
"But, Mugan, how did you manage to get so much done so quickly?" I asked.
A sly grin crossed Mugan's face, accompanied by a boastful gleam in his eyes. "Well, you know as well as I do how important it is to build fortifications for long battles. It just so happens that the soldiers remaining here in Hausen are experienced hands with just that kind of operation."
"I see you've thought this through. Tremendous work," said Lord Aaron.
Mugan bowed. "It's the greatest honor to receive such praise from you, Lord Aaron."
So, that was why Mugan had proposed we repair the outer wall. It seemed his men had also done a good job finding reusable bricks, wood, and debris to make the work easier.
Lord Aaron and I put our holy knight stats to good use by carrying away the largest pieces of debris and breaking them down into more workable pieces. Just carrying these materials would usually have taken ten men, but for us, the work was simple. These sorts of situations made holy knights' vast strength very apparent.
As night fell, we finished securing the necessary materials to repair the main gate. There was nothing further for Lord Aaron or I to do. We left the rest of the repairs to Mugan and his construction specialists. Mugan himself

was grateful; he expected that they might even finish the section by the end of our last day.
“You leave the rest to us,” he said. “You should get yourself some rest for tomorrow’s training.”
“You’re right,” I said. “I’ll do just that. But that goes for you and your men, too. Don’t work too hard.”
“All right, all right.”
I waved and headed for my tent back in the town square. I left Lord Aaron with Mugan, since the two had things to discuss regarding the main gate. My heart fluttered with a touch of excitement when I thought about soaking in the hot spring bath once more. The soothing effect of hot spring water on an exhausted body truly was a miracle!
I expected Miria to make an excuse to join me in the bath, but she was doing additional survey work around the city. For Hausen to be acknowledged as an official city once again, Seifort needed a report confirming that the monsters had truly been purged. This mission had been given to her specially from Mugan, though he had an ulterior motive; he was worried Miria might disrupt the repairs on the gate. She wasn’t a bad girl, by any means. She was just, well, loyal to a fault, and happened to get herself into a lot of mischief.
In any case, I was free to enjoy another relaxed bath, all by myself. I quickly stripped off my armor in my tent and got my towel and change of clothes. I felt my body’s desire to once again submerge into the warm bathwater. Hausen’s hot spring was truly impressive.

***

“Ahh, what a wonderful bath…”
I returned to my tent wrapped in cozy relaxation. I felt so comfortable and warm that I would have dropped into sleep the moment I lay down. Before that, though, my armor and sword needed my attention. I took a cloth and polished them clean of dirt and grime. It had been a while since I had done this. Usually, Miria did this maintenance for me. I never asked her to, but she did it all the same.
“That’s better,” I said, examining my work.
With my armor and sword ready, I prepared my clothes for tomorrow. Finally, I placed my pendant by my bed. The blue jewel was a gift I had received from Fate. I’d asked a craftsman to make a pendant for it so I could easily take the stone with me wherever I went. It was only a small thing, but I needed it to remember the days we had spent together, and how much I had enjoyed them. This pendant was my link to Fate.
“Tomorrow, I’ll show you my very best. I’m going to get stronger and accomplish my duties in Galia so I can come home to Seifort. Okay, Fate?”

I touched the pendant tenderly, then felt an uncomfortable gaze bore into my head. I turned around and saw a face glare at me through the gap in the tent entrance.
I screamed in shock, then realized who the eyes belonged to. “Miria?!”
“What’s the meaning of this?!” She was completely oblivious to the fact that she had just scared the wits out of me. She stormed into my tent and pointed at the pendant. “It can’t be! Did you get this pendant…from a boy?! You did, didn’t you?! And you didn’t tell me a thing about it! Not one thing!”
I wasn’t sure why I was supposed to have told her anything at all about my private affairs. This was an important memory of mine, and I wished she’d leave it alone.
“It can’t be! My dear Lady Roxy, she… Someone tell me it’s a lie!” Miria was in shock. She looked like a child abandoned. In fact, she appeared so devastated that I thought it was important to say something to calm her down. However, Miria spoke first. “It’s decided! I’m sleeping over tonight so that I can forget all about this bad dream!”
“What? How will that help?!”
“Please, Lady Roxy! I’m begging you!”
“Calm down, or you’ll pull down the whole tent, Miria! And, please, watch out for the clothes I set out for tomorrow!” I was utterly dumbstruck by her tantrum.
At that moment, her ever-conscientious babysitter arrived. Mugan’s arm deftly poked through the tent entrance and took hold of Miria’s collar. With one quick movement, he pulled Miria out of the tent.
Outside, I heard the two begin arguing.
“If you want to sleep together with someone so badly, you can spend the night by my side.”
“Huh?!”
“It might not look like it, but when my daughter was young, I was a master of putting her to bed. Shall I regale you with my vast setlist of lullabies?”
“No! Absolutely not. I’ll be just fine with Lady Roxy, thank you, Captain.”
“Beggars can’t be choosers, young Miria. You’ll have to make do with old Mugan.”
“What?! No! Lady Roxy, help!”
I felt sorry for Miria, but at the same time, I thought it might be good for her to reflect on invading my privacy. I silently listened to her cries as they faded into the distance, then went to sleep to prepare for the following day’s training.
My training was for me, yes. But it was just as much for my soldiers, who had provided me the time to take this opportunity. I intended to give it my absolute best.

***

Our last day of training took place in the castle courtyard, which had become our practice ground. I had executed the Grand Cross technique some twenty times, yet I still could not contain its power.
“You’ve improved since yesterday,” said Lord Aaron. “From three seconds to six. Nothing to be so glum about, Roxy. Progress is progress.”
My breathing was heavy and exhausted. “But this…like this…it’s…not going to be of any use…”
There was nothing for it but to keep practicing. I had to believe that, even if I hadn’t mastered the technique, I was indeed improving. I felt as if I was on the cusp of getting it; I just needed a little more time.
I gripped my holy sword tight once more and readied myself for another attempt. As I did, a great sound echoed from the town square on the eastern side of the city. A building had crumbled, sending sand and clouds of dust into the sky.
“That…that energy, it’s…”
“You can feel it, even from this distance? Impressive,” said Lord Aaron. “Yes, you’re on the mark. Monsters.”
So, monsters were still lurking in the city after all, and they had finally decided to rear their heads. Our exploration earlier had been meant to avert this sort of disaster, but it seemed we underestimated the sheer size of Hausen.
I sheathed my sword. Lord Aaron and I rushed from the castle toward the commotion. By the time we reached the area, my troops were already holding the beasts at bay.
Mugan noticed our arrival and brought us up to speed on the situation. “The main gate repairs were proceeding ahead of schedule, so I split the team and had them start clearing debris. Underneath, our men discovered a large hole. We suspect it connected to the sewer system. Monsters just poured out of it. We’re evacuating townsfolk so we can hold the creatures off, but as you can see, we were caught flat-footed.”
One look at our enemies told me everything I needed to know. We were fighting the undead: skeleton knights and skeleton archers. Against regular attacks, these monsters simply crumpled into piles of bones, then pulled themselves back together. Defeating them meant using either magic or elemental-infused attacks.
The battle was already underway. Soldiers and skeletons clashed everywhere. Casting spells here could just as easily injure allies as foes. As for elemental attacks, only Miria could use magic swords.
She ran up to me with her flamberge in hand, the scalloped blade alight with flame. “Lady Roxy, I’m so sorry! If I’d been more careful with my investigation, this never would’ve happened.”
“It’s nothing to worry yourself about, Miria. I know you did the very best you could. There’s no way you could have known they were hiding in the sewers.”

“Roxy’s right,” Lord Aaron added. “I’ve been in Hausen since we started rebuilding, and I never noticed a thing. If you’re going to blame anyone, you should start with me. These monsters are more cunning, more ingenious than I ever suspected. But first things first—let’s clear them out. Are you with me?”
“Thank you, Lord Aaron! I’m right behind you!”
Empowered by his words, Miria charged with him toward the skeletons. Aaron unleashed his Grand Cross tech-art and imbued his blade with holy power. He was ready to take on the undead. Miria put her flamberge to good use, cutting her enemies into flaming ashes. But the two were trapped in a dogfight against enemies who continued to pour out from the hole in the floor, and they were trapped on the back foot.
I wanted to join the fray and support them, but I still couldn’t wield Grand Cross as freely as Lord Aaron. If I couldn’t control the tech-art, I knew its explosive effects would do more harm than good. Possibilities rushed through my head. Should I slow the skeletons down using regular attacks, or would I be better off helping the remaining townsfolk evacuate?
My eyes stopped on my pendant as it slipped from my chest piece. *If Fate saw me like this, what would he think?*
“He’d…he’d laugh at me, wouldn’t he?”
I couldn’t let that happen. I had to hold true to his expectations. I had to be true to *myself*. I wouldn’t back down. Not here.
It’s okay. It’s fine. Just focus, and…
I channeled energy into my sword to charge the Grand Cross tech-art. As the energy peaked, I grasped it. Faces flashed before my eyes. The members of the Hart family…my mother, my father. Lord Aaron, Miria, Mugan, and the troops under my command. And of course, Fate.
I would not betray their hopes. I would not betray their trust.
“This…”
My holy sword was immersed in light. Power circulated through the blade, nestling inside the metal. I had finally succeeded in truly imbuing my sword with holy energy. I knew just what to use it for. I leapt into the fray, joining Lord Aaron and Miria.
“Sorry I’m late,” I cried. “But I’m here to help!”
“By the look of that blade…you’ve finally mastered it, haven’t you?” Lord Aaron asked.
“I never could have done it without your guidance, Lord Aaron. You have my thanks!”
He ran his sword through another skeleton and grinned. “Think nothing of it!”
Miria leapt with joy and rushed to me. “Are you really fighting for me, Lady Roxy?!”
I had no idea how to respond to her.
“Why the silent treatment again?! Am I wrong?”
“Miria, I’m not fighting solely for your sake! I fight for *all* of us!”

“Woo!” she pumped her fist. “But that includes me, right?! You better look out, because I’m *all sorts* of fired up right now!”
Miria cut down skeleton after skeleton, overjoyed at hearing only the words she wanted to hear. I left her as she was. For now, it was better to concentrate on the fight.
Though we were initially at a disadvantage, with my support, the tide turned in our favor. The townsfolk safely evacuated, and all that was left was to defeat the rest of the skeletons swarming from the hole in the ground.
But the road ahead was never as smooth as we hoped. The ground around the hole crumbled, and from within the darkness emanated monstrous pressure.
Lord Aaron seemed to have predicted this. “Roxy, Miria, get behind me,” he said. “Everyone else, take cover!” By informing everybody of the incoming threat, he cleared enough room to fight whatever was coming. “I suspected something else lurked down there. Something that cloaked these skeletons, so we couldn’t sense their presence. Still, I didn’t expect *this*.”
A lich lord itself appeared from the darkness. Lord Aaron’s Identify skill told him this monster was not a true crowned beast, merely a smaller spawn of hate, but it was dangerous all the same. I had spent a good deal of time polishing my skills and leveling up on the way to Hausen. However, facing off against a lich lord alone was sheer folly.
But since I have Lord Aaron by my side…
“Miria,” I said, snapping the girl out of her shock. “I need you to handle the rest of the skeletons. Lord Aaron and I will take care of the lich lord. Lord Aaron?”
“Works for me,” he said. “This is quite the opponent. I must admit I’m looking forward to it!”
We faced the lich lord and closed in, attacking from opposite directions. I struck first, cutting in from the left. The lich deflected my blow with its scythe. However, I had expected that, and my movement left the lich’s right side free for Lord Aaron. He stabbed his blade deep into the beast’s torso, slicing it open.
Lord Aaron knocked the lich off-balance. I wasn’t going to give it a chance to recover. I pushed its scythe up into the air, then cut deep into its body before jumping back. Our attacks weakened the monster. Since our opening assaults were a success, victory was a matter of keeping the momentum in our favor.
As I prepared for another attack, Lord Aaron moved toward me. “What is it, Lord Aaron?”
“Look at it,” he said. “The monster won’t move easily after those attacks. So, let me teach you one last thing before you go.”
He pointed his blade toward the lich lord in a movement I now knew all too well. It was the Grand Cross, and he aimed at the lich lord’s squirming body. “Place your blade above mine, Roxy.”

“All right.” When my blade touched Lord Aaron’s, the two holy swords lit up even brighter.
“This is something the young man I told you of taught me,” said Lord Aaron. “The young man who was also a holy knight. I had no idea it was possible—perhaps because, as holy knights, we are strong enough on our own that we rarely fight alongside others. I realized then that perhaps even more powers are hidden in these techniques we use. But discovering those isn’t a job for an old man like me! No, it’s for the youths who’ll lead us into the future!”
“Lord Aaron…”
“I have taught you everything I can, Roxy. Are you ready?”
“Yes!”
Our blades simultaneously charged with energy, and we released our blinding holy light with a unified shout.
“Grand Cross!”
A colossal pillar of light engulfed the lich. It shrieked and writhed in agony as it swung its scythe and, weapon and all, disintegrated in the cleansing radiance of our attack.
The brilliance of the Grand Cross quickly faded into the customary quiet of Hausen.
That moment of calm seemed to symbolize the end of my studies with Lord Aaron.

***

With the main gate repairs complete, our small squadron prepared to leave Hausen and return to the rest of the army. Lord Aaron and his people saw us off at the gate. It made me very happy, but all the same, I felt sorrow to be leaving.

"Roxy," said Lord Aaron, with a slightly troubled look on his face, "can I ask you a small favor?"

"What is it, Lord Aaron? If it is within my abilities, please do not hesitate to ask."

The old holy knight hesitated a moment before he went on. "The young man I told you about, the one who made his way here by the hands of fate. He was equipped with a black sword, and he was headed for Galia."

"Galia?"

"Yes. That young man possesses an incredible power, yet I sensed that he struggles to keep it under control. If you meet him in your travels across Galia, I want you to save him. Please, Roxy. Save him before he loses himself to that power."

"But…Lord Aaron, why me?"

Lord Aaron smiled, then his gaze fell firmly upon my own. "Because you are the same, you and that young man. Your personalities and your swordsmanship are worlds apart, but you both carry great emotion in your blades. In time, your feelings will be stronger than any skill you could acquire. That's what I think, and that's why I am asking you."

I felt awkward to have Lord Aaron, the Blade of Light, bow his head to me, but I accepted his request. I did not know who this young man was who could have had such an impact on the old holy knight. Still, if this mysterious person was truly headed for Galia, then he would most certainly reveal himself to me. This young man had taught the Blade of Light himself the hidden potential of the Grand Cross. And if such a man went to Galia…

"If it is within my power to do so," I said, "I will do my very best."

"You have my thanks, young holy knight." Lord Aaron smiled and held out his hand.

This is not goodbye, I thought. This is a promise that we will meet again.

I shook his hand, and I left Hausen.

In my heart, I thanked Lord Aaron once more for all his help and his teachings. Then my thoughts turned to the young man who he had mentioned, the mysterious holy knight who carried a black sword. I had a feeling that somewhere in Galia, that black-clad holy knight and I…

Our paths were destined to cross.

Creator Profiles

STORYISSHIKI ICHIKA

The super blue blood moon! I was pretty skeptical because it sounds like it was named by a teenager, but when I actually saw it, it was a moon glowing with the power of youth. Very cool.

ILLUSTRATIONSFAME

Nice to meet you. This is my first time working on a light novel, and I enjoyed it. I’m cheering for Lady Roxy!

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